THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

ELLERY QUEEN'S

JUNE 1992
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MYSTERY MAGAZINE

ANDREW VACHSS
Born Bad

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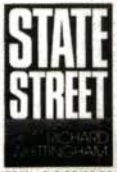

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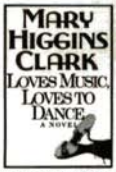

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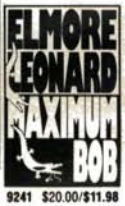

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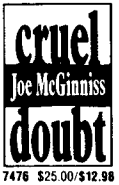

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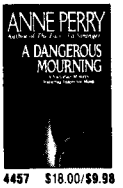

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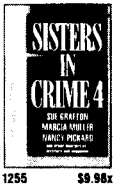

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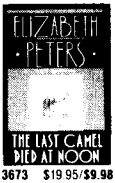

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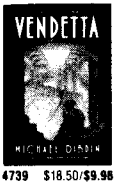

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On our cover is ANDREW VACHSS (see page 11)

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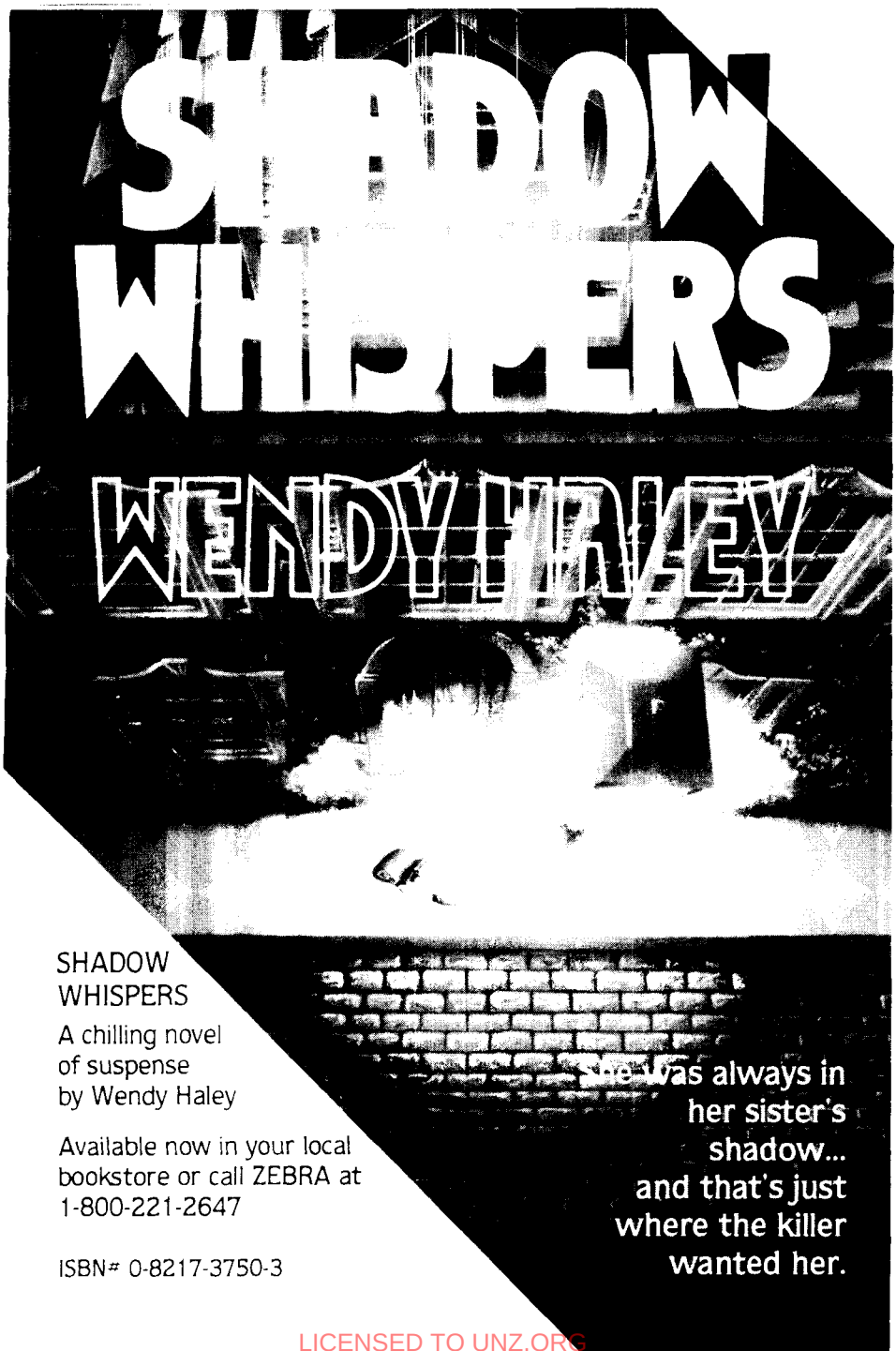

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a *NEW* short story by

ANDREW VACHSS

A lawyer specializing in children's cases, Andrew Vachss is in a prime position to understand the pathology that may result from child abuse. In this riveting portrait of a serial killer, he poses a question that has long absorbed criminologists. . . .

BORN BAD

by ANDREW VACHSS

The man was husky, with a big chest and thick wrists, wearing a tweed jacket over an oxford-cloth white shirt and plain dark tie. His hair was cropped short, eyes alert behind aluminum-framed glasses. He handed his battered leather medical satchel to the guard standing by the metal detector.

"Morning, Jackson," he said.

"Good morning to you, Doc. Carrying any weapons today?"

Doc tapped his head, smiled. The guard looked carefully through the satchel, ran his electronic wand over Doc's body.

"Everybody there?"

"Waiting on you, Doc."

He threw a half-salute at the guard and strolled down the sterile concrete corridor, the bag swinging at his side, taking his time.

He came to an institutional green door with a hand-lettered sign taped on its front. Task Force. He knocked. The door was opened by a heavyset, thick-necked man wearing a shoulder holster. He stepped aside and the man the guard had called Doc entered.

The room was long and narrow. He was facing a row of windows. Barred windows. The wall behind him was covered with corkboard, littered with randomly fastened charts, graphs, maps. A battered wood podium stood at the head of a double-length conference table;

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behind it, a small movie screen pulled down like a window shade. In the upper corner of the room, a TV set stood on an elevated platform, a VCR on a shelf underneath. Cigarette smoke hung in the air, blue-tinted in the slanting sunlight.

Doc took his seat, looked around. They were all there, waiting.

"How come you're always the last to show up, Doc?" Oscar asked. The slim black investigator pretended an irritation he didn't feel. "We moved the Task Force into this looney bin just 'cause you work here, the least you could do is make the damn meetings on time."

"Sorry, hoss. There was a little problem on one of the wards."

"Never mind that now," a red-haired woman said, the chief prosecutor in the Homicide Bureau. "Tell him what happened."

A tall blond man stepped to the podium, moving with the authority he carried from his long-ago days as a street cop, a sheaf of papers in his hand. He carefully extracted a single sheet, smoothed it flat, flicked on an opaque projector. One page of a neatly typed letter sprang into life on the screen.

"It's from him?" a Hispanic with a duelist's mustache asked. He was the group's forensics expert.

"Yeah," the blond man answered. "We xeroxed the whole thing. Seven pages. The lab boys went over it with an electron microscope. Typed on a computer, probably that laptop he carries around. It was printed out on a laser printer. Generic paper, standard number ten business envelope. Untraceable. But we know it's him—he left us a perfect thumbprint below the signature."

"Damn!" the black man said.

"Postmark?" the redhead asked.

"Tucson, Arizona. Four days ago," the blond answered. "Central Post Office. He won't be there now."

On the screen, the letter stood out in bold contrast to the darkened room. Justified margins, single spaced with the paragraphs indented.

"He's always so neat, so precise," the woman said.

"Yeah," the blond agreed. He looked across the table. "Looks like your idea worked, Doc. When you wrote that article about the Surgeon—the one where you said he had to have been an abused child—it made him mad. Smoked him out. Look at this letter—he's boiling over. Slashed at your theory like he's been doing at women all around the country."

Doc nodded, waiting patiently for the recap he knew was coming as soon as he'd spotted new faces in the room.

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The blond man swept his eyes around the table, willing everyone to silence. "Mark Anthony Monroe," he began, nodding his head toward a blown-up black-and-white photograph on the wall to his left. "White male, age forty-one last birthday. Five foot eleven, one hundred and sixty pounds. Blond and blue. Undergraduate degree in physics, graduate work in computer technology. No scars, marks, or tattoos. No known associates. Mother and father divorced when he was two. Mother remarried when he was five. Divorced again when he was eight. No contact with either father or stepfather since, whereabouts of both unknown. Mother died when he was in his late twenties. You with me so far?"

Nods and grunts of assent from around the room. Doc drew a series of tiny boxes on his notepad, not looking up.

"First arrest, age thirteen," the blond man continued. "Fire-setting. He convinced the juvie officers it was an accident—dismissed. Next time down, he was fourteen. He put a cat in a shoebox, poured gasoline over it, dropped a match. He got probation, referred for counseling. The counselor said he didn't mean to hurt the cat—some kind of scientific experiment. At sixteen, he was dropped for attempted rape. Attacked a schoolteacher on a stairwell right outside the gym. Cut her too. Sent to a juvenile institution. Did almost five years. After his discharge, he was quiet for a while. We have an admission, voluntary admission to a psychiatric hospital when he was in his mid-twenties. He was treated for depression, signed himself out after a few months. Nothing since.

"He went to college, like I said. Far as we can tell, he's never worked a real job.

"For the last two and a half years, he's been roaming the country. Killing. He kills them different ways. All women. But no matter how he kills them, he always cuts out the heart. Neat, clean cuts. He knows what he's doing. That's why the newspaper guys call him the Surgeon.

"We got thirteen confirmed kills, and a whole bunch of Unsolved that may be his.

"He's smooth and slick. Talks nice, got a lot of employment skills. And a good deal of cash . . . money his mother left him when she died. He don't look like a killer . . . hell, he don't look like much of anything. He could be anywhere."

He looked around the room. "Any questions?"

"You do a profile on him, Marty?" the redhead asked.

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"Profile? Yeah, we did a damn profile, Suzanne. Nomadic, prolific driver, rootless, pathological hate for females. Serial killer . . . that's what we got. Big deal."

The Hispanic looked up from his place at the end of the table. "He . . . do anything to the women? Besides kill them?"

"No. At least nothing we can tell. No semen found on or in any of the bodies."

"Why's he do it, then?"

"Because he likes to," Doc said, so softly some of the assembled hunters had to lean forward to hear his voice.

"Yeah, well let's all see what he says about it," the blond man said, stepping to the corner and switching off the overhead lights. He adjusted a dial until the letters on the screen were big enough to read from anywhere in the room.

My dear, ignorant Dr. Ruskin:

I read your fascinatingly stupid "analysis" of my motivations in the June 15 issue of *Parade*. It was so pathetically uninformed, so lacking in insight, so bereft of logic that I felt compelled to provide the education you so obviously neglected in medical school.

It is my understanding that you have been "studying" my case for some months now. How unfortunate that your politics interfere with your judgment—that is highly unprofessional. You are clearly one of those irredeemably ignorant individuals who takes it on faith that nobody is "born bad." You believe there must be some etiology of a monster—some specific cause and effect. I quote from your purple prose: "There is no biogenetic code for serial killer. There may be some hard-wired personality propensities, but the only way to produce such a monster is early, chronic, systematic child abuse." How I pity your lack of intelligence—and what contempt I have for your cowardice. Like all liberals, you hide your head in the sand of religion, convincing yourself that evil does not exist.

Pay attention, you little worm: I *was* born bad. I came out of the womb evil. My only pleasure is power, and I learned early on that the ultimate power is to possess life. To extinguish it at my will. You know how some men break hearts? Well, I *take* hearts. And I keep them.

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Was I an "abused child"? Certainly not. My mother was, if anything, over-indulgent. I was always treated with kindness, love, and respect. And I repaid that investment in blood. I am not insane, and never have been. When I admitted myself to the psychiatric hospital, it was to avoid the consequences of my own act—the rape of a little girl. I was never caught. Never even charged. And I probably never will be.

I am not insane, despite your fervent wish that I be so. The behavior you so carefully chart is not the prodromal phase of psychosis, it is entirely volitional. Should you be interested in propounding a more accurate, precise diagnosis, you might check your holy DSM-III, your biblical attempt to quantify human behavior. I'll guide your dim brain to the right spot, Doctor: Anti-Social Personality Disorder, 301.70. Such high-flown verbiage to describe what I am. Dangerous. Remorseless. Evil.

By now I am certain you stand in abject awe of my protean grasp of psychiatric jargon. Do not be surprised, I have been studying your ancient tablets for many years—preparing my defense. You see, Doctor, I have none of the grandiosity that characterizes others who have walked my same road. Such subhumans are not of my ilk. Ted Bundy was a contemptible, whining worm—an obsessive-compulsive the media made into a criminal genius simply because he possessed the slightly above-average IQ sufficient to enter law school. Arrogance without intellect personified. And John Wayne Gacy, a repulsive gargoyle. Were the media not so utterly enthralled by high body counts, he would not have merited a line of type. Lust-driven cowards, with not the remotest concept of higher orders. Your pedestrian theories fit such creatures quite well, Doctor—both abused children, screaming in rage against their past.

As I said, I am not grandiose, or narcissistic. I acknowledge that capture is possible. Should such luck (and it will take considerable luck) befall you, I expect to be acquitted at any trial. You will all judge me "insane." Because you fear the truth.

So please spare me your insipid wish fulfillment. I am not a "sexual sadist," I have no "fetish." My rituals are of my own making, designed for my pleasure, not the subject of any compulsion. They are, in fact, private ceremonies—homage to my sociopathic genius. I am capable of modifying my behavior. Indeed, I have done so on many occasions. The unexpected presence of potential witnesses has caused me to forsake my

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trophies several times. But, if you look closely, you will note unmistakable forensic evidence of my passage even when I have not had the opportunity to take the hearts from my victims. Read the last sentence carefully, you stupid slug: *my* victims. They belong to me, forever.

My many homicides are not a "cry for help." I have no desire to be caught. I have taken great pains to avoid capture. But, should that unlikely event come to pass, I know I can rely on religious cowards such as yourself to leap to my defense, to stridently proclaim my "insanity" to a court. And should a different result emerge, my situation will not change materially. I have no need of sex, and less of human companionship. Serial Killer Chic has infected American consciousness. (Perhaps you should be studying *that* phenomenon instead of wasting your time trying to analyze me.) I will be an object of fascination. Women will offer to marry me. Publishers will clamor for my life story. Wealthy morons will buy my paintings, telling their friends they have seen into my soul.

You are not my nemesis, Doctor, you are my safety net.

Oh, don't you wish I were insane? Don't you pray to your ineffectual gods that I am the product of an abusive home? Doesn't the truth terrify you?

Let me appeal to your scientific mind—if only to that portion not clouded by your so-called "education." You claim to be an environmentalist, a determinist, if you will. I cannot, in your narrow-minded view, be "born" bad. It must be attributable to something in the way I was nurtured, yes? Unfortunately for your indefensible theories, there is irrefutable evidence to the contrary. My mother, despite her impeccable conduct toward me, was no saint. She had her own demons. I was, as I said, raised in an environment of total love. Yet my brother, my half-genetic counterpart (we had different biological fathers), was not. Unlike myself, he was the target of my mother's insanity. Yes, Doctor, my mother was conventionally insane. Bipolar, schizoid, with more than a touch of pedophilia. Ah, wouldn't your liberal heart bleed for my poor brother—locked and chained in a dark basement closet for literally days at a time, beaten with a wide variety of objects, burned with cigarettes. The poor tyke was violated by one of my mother's gentleman friends while my mother held him. A Polaroid camera provided many hours of entertainment for my mother, and, later, a con-

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siderable source of income as well. And yet, my brother is a fine, upstanding citizen. He has never committed a transgression against society in his entire life. A credit to the community, welcome anywhere. If your lamentably weak little theories had any basis in fact, my brother would have been a prime candidate for what your stupid article called the "negative fallout" from child abuse: drugs, alcohol, promiscuity, suicide, crime. None of the above ever occurred. Perhaps you should do some research, Doctor. Have you ever read the seminal work of Denis M. Donovan in the field of traumatology? His concept of "inescapable shock syndrome" is most illuminating, although I fear it would be wasted on a man of your distinctly limited scope.

Your theories are lies. I am the living, life-taking proof.

Absent fortuitous circumstance, you will never catch me. I am invisible. People like you make it certain that we don't see evil. I am a shark in a suburban swimming pool. Safe and deadly forever, feeding as I will.

Take my warning, Doctor. So long as you promulgate your explanations for evil, it will flourish. Face the truth. And fear it forever.

The blond man waited patiently until the entire Task Force had finished reading. Then he flicked on the lights and looked across the room at Doc.

"You know, Doc, you and me, we've been having this go-round for years. I always said your theories were nonsense, didn't I? I been a cop too long. I got to hand it to this freak—he told it like it is. I mean, there's your evidence, right? Two brothers, raised in the same household. Look how different they turned out. One's treated like a prince, he turns out to be a monster. The other's tortured all kinds of ways, he turns out to be a decent guy. I think we all learned something today. The freak's right: all the stuff about child abuse causing crime is just so much liberal claptrap. You got anything to say?"

Doc took off his glasses, cleaned them patiently with a handkerchief. The red-haired woman lit a cigarette. Others leaned forward, watching from the sidelines.

"Come on, Doc. You've been studying the Surgeon for years, going over the ground inch by inch," the black man said. "You got any comeback for what Marty said?"

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The husky man said, "Yes," very quietly, and got to his feet. He looked into the face of each person in the room, one by one, eyes shining with sadness and with truth.

"He doesn't have a brother," he said.

ON OUR COVER

Andrew Vachss's first novel (*Flood*) was published in 1986 to glowing reviews, and since then he has seen the publication of five more novels and some two dozen short stories. But fiction writing is not this author's primary occupation. In 1976 he began a legal practice that has earned him international attention as one of a very small number of lawyers who represent only children and youth—in cases that range from custody matters to sexual abuse, neglect, and delinquency.

Vachss turned to fiction writing in an attempt to bring to public attention the atrocities against children he witnessed first as an investigator for the U.S. Public Health Service's task force on sexually transmitted diseases and later as a social worker and lawyer. His hard-boiled stories featuring a private eye known only as Burke are gritty and violent, but true to his own experience of the street. "I wanted to show people what hell looks like," he says, "and I didn't want an angel for a guide."

If the picture Vachss paints is a grim one, it is one he believes could be changed with appropriate changes in the legal system and in society. "Monsters," he insists, "are *made,* not born. I believe that if you took Ted Bundy and let him breed and then you raised that kid, that kid would be fine." And this is a philosophy Vachss has employed in another context. On our cover with her owner is Honey, the Vachsses' ten-month-old pit bull. The breed has gained notoriety in recent years as the fearsome guard dog of drug dealers; ownership of such animals is strictly controlled in the U.K. But according to Honey's owner, such apprehensions about the pit bull are misplaced. Raised properly, he says, Honey will be no more vicious than any other dog.

Mr. Vachss lives with his wife Alice in New York City. His most recent novel, *Sacrifice,* is available from Alfred A. Knopf.

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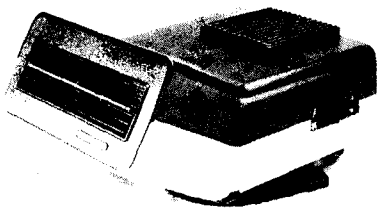

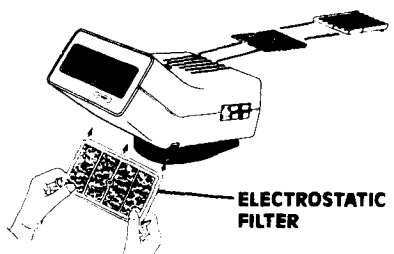

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a *NEW* Ambrose Ganelon story by

JAMES POWELL

Now in his twelfth year of chronicling the adventures of four generations of Ganelon's, James Powell appears ever able to construct an elaborate puzzle from elements historical and fictitious. We pick up the story in 1867; a time when graverobbers unearthed the dead in the name of science, and Ambrose Ganelon, founder of the Ganelon Detective Agency, was to be found absorbed in the mystifying disappearance of a six-weeks-old corpse. . . .

UNQUIET GRAVES

by JAMES POWELL

On a chilly October evening in 1867 while the small Riviera principality of San Sebastiano lay beneath a hard, persistent rain, Ambrose Ganelon, founder of the detective agency that bore his name, worked late. For hours his short, stocky frame had been hunched over the ledger where for more than twenty years he had detailed the machinations of his arch-rival, the wily Dr. Ludwig Fong. Of late, when the business of the agency was finished, Ganelon had pondered a single curious question: why had Fong conceived so great a hatred for the fledgling Dominion of Canada? To find the answer he had even sent one of his operatives to the saintly and erudite Brother Cesari of Alexandria who lived in the open high atop a stone column and could only be communicated with by messages sent up in a basket.

All of a sudden Ganelon snapped the ledger shut and pushed it away from him across the Bokhara rug that covered his desk. He sat for a moment with hand over his weary eyes, feeling dull-headed and stale. It seemed to him that he hadn't been out of his carpet slippers for a month. Thinking that a long walk might do him good,

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he turned toward the window and for the first time he heard the dismal racket of the rain in the rue Blondin. With a fretful shrug he rose and started for the music stand where his oboe lay. Just then old Simon, his clerk, rapped on the door to announce Mr. Asher Benjamin, the dealer in antique jewelry from the Boulevard Tancredi who had been so helpful in the case the newspapers called The Portland Cameo Affair. Ganelon had just enough time to smooth down the lock of black hair on his high forehead and arrange the sour-tempered mask he used to face the world.

Mr. Benjamin arrived in the agitated state common to agency visitors. But Ganelon believed he detected a hint of elation in the man's distress, as though not all of his news was bad. Mr. Benjamin allowed Simon to carry off his dripping overcoat and hat to dry them by the fire in the outer office. Then he sat down in the chair Ganelon offered him and explained why he had come.

"I am president of our local Jewish burial society," he said. "So as you might imagine, I've found the Resurrectionist activity of late, all this ghoulish stealing of bodies to sell to medical schools, most unsettling."

Ganelon grunted sympathetically. San Sebastiano did, in fact, lag behind the Continent in the use of corpses for anatomical study. In the seventeenth century Princess Gloriana had given over the bodies of executed murderers for scholarly research and for two centuries this had been ample for the needs of science. But in more recent years, the demand for bodies had begun to exceed the supply, a shortage compounded by the marked decline in the number of murders in the principality after Ganelon opened his agency. Proposed laws to release the bodies of those who died in prison or indigent for medical study had encountered strong opposition because dissection still had a stigma the popular imagination associated with the fate of murderers.

"This morning a member of our community was laid to rest," continued Mr. Benjamin. "Two hours ago, for my own peace of mind, I decided to visit the cemetery. Leon, the caretaker, is conscientious enough after his own fashion. But I hoped I might impress upon him the need for vigilance. When I arrived I ordered the coachman to wait and hurried through the rain to the little lodge at the gate where Leon lives. An oil lamp was burning on the table but he wasn't there. So I went out into the desolation of the cemetery proper, calling his name. The teeming darkness made no reply. Alarmed, I hurried to where we'd buried the body this morning.

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Now here I should point out that our cemetery was laid out on low land. For this reason interment is above ground. Each coffin is placed inside a stone coffer and covered with a stone lid. Lifting a lid is a job for two men. But the coffer with the new body didn't seem to have been disturbed. I called Leon's name again. That's when I saw a light in a far corner of the burial ground. I ran toward it and found him lying dead beside his lantern. There wasn't a mark on his body and his eyes were wide and staring as if he'd died of fright. Next to him was an open coffer. The coffin inside was empty."

Having gotten past this terrible part of his narrative, Mr. Benjamin stopped to get his breath. Then he said, "I drove at once to police headquarters. A Sergeant Flanel returned with me to the cemetery."

"A peacock among policemen, Flanel," muttered Ganelon.

"He did seem . . . excessively dressed," observed Mr. Benjamin. "In any event, he declared the whole business to be the work of graverobbers. He said Leon had been 'burked,' that was the expression he used."

" 'Burked' as in the murderers Burke and Hare," said Ganelon. "They suffocated their victims and sold the bodies to doctors for dissection." Then he waved his hand as though scattering his words. "So what do you want of me?"

"I think Sergeant Flanel is mistaken," said Mr. Benjamin. "There's more here than murder in the course of a body snatching. Look into things and see if you don't agree that the events of tonight are of a different order entirely."

Ganelon cocked a wary eyebrow, recalling how quickly his few conversations with this man, however begun, had turned to the supernatural. Mr. Benjamin had a strong religious bent. Ganelon did not. Far from it. And he did not like chasing spirits around in the rain, be they imp or angel. "Are you quite sure the body buried today is still there?"

"Sergeant Flanel and I opened the coffer. The body was as we'd left it, in shroud and prayer shawl."

"And the stolen body, how long had it been dead?"

"Six weeks," replied Mr. Benjamin. "And vanished just like that."

Ganelon marked the note of elation in the man's voice. Scowling, he caught his lower lip between his thumb and forefinger and tugged at it thoughtfully.

They did not speak during the first few minutes of the trip to the cemetery. The dim interior of the carriage smelled of oats, harness

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leather, and that particularly dark red wine called Bull's Blood, a favorite among the principality's coachmen. Ganelon did not begrudge the man his wine on a night like this. The carriage moved ahead with a swaying, cradle-like motion, the sounds of the horse's hooves swallowed up by the drumbeat of the falling rain.

Then the dealer in antique jewelry spoke. "Did you ever meet the late Abel Peretz?"

"Peretz the furrier?" replied Ganelon. "Is it his body that's disappeared?" He had only known the man by his reputation as a subscriber to every worthy cause.

Mr. Benjamin nodded and said, "I knew Peretz almost from the day he arrived here, a young fugitive from some pogrom in Russian Poland with all he owned in a bundle under his arm and a fresh scar from a Cossack saber over one eye. He came into my shop looking for work. I had nothing but told him Mendelman down the street needed a cutter. Did he know the fur business? He winked like a rogue and left. Well, Mendelman hired him, but an hour later he snatched the knife from Peretz and shook it under his nose. 'You're no fur cutter,' he shouted. 'A fur cutter doesn't hold a knife like that. He holds it like this. Get out of my shop!' So Peretz left. But now he knew how to hold the knife, which was enough to get him a job with old Winkler the furrier around the corner, and by keeping his eyes open and his mouth shut he managed to hide his ignorance until he'd learned his craft. Yes, whatever Peretz set his mind to doing he did. Like winning the hand of Winkler's beautiful daughter. Now there was a happy couple."

The light from a lamppost shone in between the leather window curtains and touched Mr. Benjamin's face. He was smiling at the opposite seat as though the Peretzes were sitting there in the bloom of life. Then he frowned and said, "It was the typhus. The damned typhus carried off the young bride. From that day Peretz was a changed man. Oh, he'd always given his share to charity like the rest of us. But suddenly he couldn't give away his money fast enough. Every poor widow felt his generosity. Every threadbare scholar had a claim on his purse. He provided grave clothes for the dead and food baskets for the sick. The tin boxes of the charity collectors positively rattled with joy whenever Peretz passed by. So he lived and died."

"Why tell me all this?"

"Because whatever Peretz set his mind to doing he did," said Mr. Benjamin. "And in his final years his one desire was to die and be

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buried in Jerusalem. So this summer, when his health began to fail, he sold all he owned, house, business, his property in town, giving the money away to the needy and to establish a fund to provide orphan girls with marriage dowries."

"Quite admirable," began Ganelon, impatiently. "But . . ."

"Peretz fell dead on his way to the dock on the day of his departure," said Mr. Benjamin. "As he lay there on the street some thief stole his wallet with the boat ticket to Port Said and the pittance he'd set aside to live until he died." He shook his head at the irony of it all, adding, "The police found the empty wallet in an alley nearby. And although it is not our custom, I placed it in his hands as a testimony to his many acts of charity when we arranged him for burial."

The pace of the carriage quickened. They had turned onto the broad boulevard that encircled the city where the ancient ramparts had once stood. Mr. Benjamin said, "When I first drove out here this evening something possessed me to pull back the curtain just as the carriage entered the street leading up to the cemetery. It was a most unearthly scene, the rain falling out of the darkness into the lamp light, the wind in the bare plane trees, the moving shadows on the rain-dashed cobbles. And there he was walking toward me in the middle of it all, a man in a long black coat and a broad-brimmed black hat. His beard was dark, full, and long, but I could not see the upper half of his face because he turned away as I approached. When the carriage had passed he faced forward again and continued on his way.

"Mr. Ganelon," said the dealer in antique jewelry, laying his hand on the detective's arm and choosing his words carefully, "I believe the man I saw was Abel Peretz. I believe his determination to be buried in Jerusalem proved stronger than the bonds of death."

Ganelon uttered an exasperated groan.

"I know what you're going to ask," said Mr. Benjamin quickly. "We buried Peretz in shroud and prayer shawl. Where did he get the clothes I saw him in? He found them among the caretaker's things. He and Leon were about the same size." The man nodded insistently and grew animated. "Imagine the scene. There is Peretz, with strength beyond our understanding, breaking out of the coffin and shouldering the lid of the coffer aside. And here comes Leon running to investigate the noise. What he saw was too much for his poor heart." Mr. Benjamin shook his head regretfully, adding, "With

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clothes to find and an omnibus to catch, I don't imagine Peretz even noticed his body."

"And what omnibus was that?" asked Ganelon.

"The one that stops at the bottom of the street. It would've gotten him to the station just in time to make the express to Marseilles. From there he'd take the early packet for Port Said."

"And I suppose he was going to pay for all this traveling out of that empty wallet you buried with him," said Ganelon, unable to keep the sarcasm from his voice. When Mr. Benjamin made no answer the detective asked, "You told Flanel all this?"

"Only the part about seeing the man walking in the rain. Flanel said he was probably just someone paying his respects to a dead relative. He said graverobbers usually work in groups of two or more with a barrow to carry away the body."

Ganelon laughed darkly. "My friend," he said, "Flanel is a fool. You are not. But Flanel's explanation of events is much simpler than yours. And Ockham's famous razor tells us the simplest explanation is generally the correct one." Ganelon folded his arms and settled back for the rest of the trip, adding just before he closed his eyes, "However, in this particular case, you're both wrong."

The old burial ground was surrounded by a whitewashed, stuccoed wall topped with a spiked railing. Mr. Benjamin stepped down into the rain, called up to the coachman to wait for them, and hurried to unlock a door in the wide iron gate. Ganelon followed in after him.

In a moment Mr. Benjamin obtained a lantern from the caretaker's lodge and lit their way through the dark necropolis until they reached a distant corner where cypress trees wept in the weather. "I had this one built for myself," said Mr. Benjamin, pointing to the open coffer beside which he had found the caretaker's body. "But I couldn't have Peretz buried in a pauper's grave." He held up the lantern so that the light fell on the coffin inside.

Ganelon stared down into the coffin for several minutes while the rainwater dripped from the brim of his hat. The empty pine box seemed to exude the chill of the beyond. Or perhaps the night was turning colder. "No, we're not dealing with graverobbers," he said. "They'd have taken a salable corpse, the one buried this morning, or Leon's, for that matter. Or both. But not Mr. Peretz's body in an advanced state of decay." Ganelon squatted down and made a quick examination of the muddle of footprints around the coffer, without

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distinguishing anything other than Flanel's fashionably pointed shoes. He straightened up and rocked back and forth on his heels for a moment. Then he said, "You'd had this one prepared for your own burial. Are there any other empty coffers nearby?"

Mr. Benjamin blinked and thought. "Over here," he said, leading Ganelon several coffers over. "Montefiore," he said. Then he pointed through the rain to another. "Solomon."

They set to work. The Montefiore coffer was empty. The Solomon was not. "Here's the explanation for your miracle," said Ganelon, a bit breathlessly from the effort of lifting the stone lid and carefully setting it on the ground. He took the lantern and leaned over the corpse in the coffer. The skin was the color of an old bruise and in places was beginning to take on a clumping, cauliflower-like texture. Someone had pulled the prayer shawl and shroud aside and made a deep, ten-centimeter cut across the body between rib cage and navel.

"But what's going on?" demanded Benjamin in a trembling voice. "This isn't Abel Peretz. I've never seen this man before in my life."

Ganelon turned his attention from the strange wound to the body itself. It was that of a man in his eighties with a full, white beard, a man who had spent some time in the Middle East, for his left cheek bore the scarring left behind by a boil called the Aleppo button which afflicted that region of the world.

"Leave me the lantern and go back to the lodge," said Ganelon. "Make some coffee to warm us up. And I'd be obliged if you'd put on the kettle. I'll be right along."

Shaking his head in wonderment, Mr. Benjamin disappeared into the darkness. When he had gone Ganelon reached down and picked up the small object that had glinted in the lantern light a moment before. Then he took a deep breath and did the job he had to do.

Ganelon crossed the cemetery with a slow, thoughtful tread. When he reached the caretaker's lodge he stood outside the door for several long minutes, oblivious to the rain. Then he stepped over the threshold and the warmth, the smell of the coffee on the stove, and the humble pleasure of suddenly being in out of the weather brought him back to reality. Casting off his sodden overcoat and hat, he took the kettle of hot water over to the wash basin on the corner table and began to scrub his hands vigorously.

Mr. Benjamin said, "This might help. The prayer shawl was of a coarse Middle Eastern weave. The man might have been Sephardic."

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As he poured the coffee he added, "But why desecrate a corpse like that?"

Drying his hands, Ganelon said, "A reason as old as the hills." He tossed the towel aside and drawing two small diamonds from a vest pocket, he passed them to Mr. Benjamin. "One of these was on the ground beside the coffer with the body. I found the other in the stomach."

Mr. Benjamin held each stone up to the light. "Perfect. Perfect," he murmured. Then he looked at Ganelon. "The stomach of the corpse?"

"I imagine they were both from a larger cache," said the detective. "In his haste the killer dropped one and overlooked the other."

"Well, if they were all like these it would be a fortune in diamonds," said his companion.

Ganelon took a swallow of coffee, choked, and swore. Mr. Benjamin shrugged apologetically and continued admiring the stones. "I'm a bit heavy-handed in the kitchen," he admitted.

"You make coffee by faith alone," said Ganelon, and collecting Mr. Benjamin's cup as he passed, he went to the door and threw the contents of both cups out into the night. Then he returned to the stove and started a fresh pot. As he worked he said, "So here we are. The killer forced Leon to take him to where Peretz's body was buried and help with the coffer lids. By then Leon had seen too much to live. So the killer brought him back to the first coffer and burked him."

"But why not just kill him there with the knife or the scalpel or whatever it was he used to get the diamonds?"

"The killer wanted it to look like the work of graverobbers," said Ganelon. "Yes, the burking's probably the only thing Flanel's gotten right this month. You see, both Flanel and the killer harbor the mistaken assumption that Burke and Hare were graverobbers. But people with nerve enough for murder don't have to haunt dark, rainy cemeteries to find their corpses." He poured the fresh coffee and watched carefully until his companion had sipped at his and nodded appreciatively.

"Drink up," ordered Ganelon. "Our killer is your man in the rain. We have visits to make. If we're lucky and he took the train they'll pick him up at the Gare St. Charles in Marseilles."

The arrival of Ambrose Ganelon and his companion caused a stir at police headquarters. An officer was dispatched to bring Sergeant

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Flanel from home. Another scampered off to get the current file of registration forms San Sebastiano's hotels must fill out for each guest. Ganelon and Mr. Benjamin exchanged glances when they came to David Elazar "late of Jerusalem" and traveling with Turkish papers, who was stopping at the Hotel de L'Angleterre. Ganelon was pleased when their carriage pulled away from the curb seconds before Sergeant Flanel arrived in a hansom.

The concierge at the Hotel de l'Angleterre, a commanding figure, recognized at a glance that Ambrose Ganelon was a kindred spirit, a fellow tyrant, and replied to his questions as though addressing an equal. Mr. Elazar matched Mr. Benjamin's description of the man in the rain on the matter of beard, build, and height. Unfortunately he had checked out of the hotel that very afternoon. But the concierge's contact with the guest had been slight. He recalled only that the rack of newspapers which the hotel provided for its guests in the lobby had prompted Mr. Elazar to ask if they kept back issues, specifically those for the third week of August. The concierge informed him they did not, directing him to the office of the city's largest newspaper, *Le Factotum du Matin*. On parting, Ganelon and the concierge traded identical bows.

As they left the hotel Mr. Benjamin said, "But that was the week of Peretz's funeral."

"I suspected as much," said Ganelon, leading the way in the dash through the rain to the carriage. When they'd settled back in their seats he said, "An interesting development. A stranger comes to town to recover diamonds from a corpse in the Jewish cemetery. But it seems he only knows the week the man died, not his name. So he must consult the obituary notices."

"But the body in Solomon's coffin wasn't Peretz," insisted Mr. Benjamin. "And Peretz's coffin was empty."

"That part is puzzling, isn't it?" admitted Ganelon. Rapping on the sliding panel to the coachman's box, he ordered the man to drive them to the telegraph office. Then he asked his companion, "With quality diamonds to sell, where would you go?"

"To Amsterdam."

"Then a visit to the telegraph office should wrap things up for the night," said Ganelon.

"May I drop you there?" asked Mr. Benjamin. "I've one more trip to the cemetery tonight. The burial society has a dead stranger's remains to put to rest."

* * *

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A week later, at Ganelon's request, Mr. Benjamin returned to the agency to be brought up to date on the mysterious case. Ganelon had already explained to him that the failure of the Marseilles police to arrest Elazar at the train station probably meant the man had traveled northward in slow stages, perhaps by carriage and river barge. Now Ganelon read him the reply to his telegram to the Amsterdam police. They had located Elazar there. But when investigators arrived at his hotel the man had fallen to his death trying to escape across the rooftops. A quantity of diamonds was recovered from the body.

Next Ganelon read a communication fresh from his operative in Alexandria. "Sir," it began, "on receipt of your telegraphed instructions I proceeded to Jerusalem to inquire after Mr. David Elazar who, I learned, had recently been the center of a police investigation in the Jewish quarter attracting much attention here. Elazar was the servant of a wealthy old man of particularly tightfisted habits who, just before he died, converted all his possessions into cash. But after the funeral when the heirs gathered to divide the inheritance, they found the miser's strongbox empty. So they dragged Elazar before the police. Elazar denied knowing where the money had gone and was jailed on suspicion. After several days the police located a local diamond merchant who admitted selling diamonds in quantity to Elazar. So the servant was charged with robbing his dying master. On the eve of his trial Elazar broke down and admitted buying diamonds, but insisted he'd been acting on his master's orders and had been bound to secrecy in the matter. According to Elazar, the old miser wanted diamonds because he meant to leave nothing behind for spendthrift heirs to squander. So with his last breath he swallowed his fortune and expired.

"The court ordered the coffin opened and the body examined. And here things took a bizarre turn, for the dead man inside was a stranger, younger, with black hair, a saber scar over one eye, and clasping a worn wallet empty of all identification. (By some wild coincidence the wallet came from San Sebastiano's own Pepin & Fils leather-goods manufacturers.) This mix-up at the cemetery caused the charges against Elazar to be dropped. But he was kept under close surveillance. Two weeks ago, as he waited at dockside in Jaffa for the tender to take him out to the Port Said steamer and a trip abroad, the police arrived and searched him and his baggage. But they found nothing and had to let him proceed. Elazar hasn't been heard of since."

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Ganelon joined his operative's report with the Amsterdam telegram and returned them to the file on his desk. "Well," he said, hoping to put a note of finality on the word, "with Elazar dead and the diamonds recovered for the heirs to squander as they see fit, I suppose the other details in the case are moot." He paused and started to rise, hoping Mr. Benjamin would agree that the matter was settled. When no agreement came and the man seemed firmly anchored in his chair, Ganelon cursed to himself, cleared his throat, and began to trace a complicated bit of rug pattern with the tip of his forefinger. "No doubt Elazar meant to recover the diamonds for himself after the funeral," he said. "But before he could act he was thrown in jail. He could have gone free by telling how the old miser had taken his wealth with him. But then he'd lose his chance at the diamonds. So instead he conceived a plan that would not only win him his freedom but get him the diamonds and out of the country to boot." Here Ganelon stopped. He worked at the rug pattern for several seconds. Then he took a deep breath and continued. "Elazar remembers a partner-in-crime from younger days, who's now a caretaker at a cemetery in San Sebastiano on the other side of the Mediterranean. So by telegraph he arranges for a devilish exchange. Elazar has Leon send him a coffin with a body in it. When it arrives he has accomplices substitute it for the miser's coffin, which they ship off to San Sebastiano. Once the diamonds are out of the country Elazar can tell the story of his master's final moments. Then he's free and comes here to recover the treasure."

Ganelon was about to launch into his description of the falling-out between Elazar and Leon: the caretaker's refusal to tell where he'd put the miser's coffin, Elazar's promise to give him a larger cut while planning to burke him later, et cetera, et cetera. But out of a corner of his eye he caught Mr. Benjamin shaking his head back and forth in the most pitying way. He looked up.

Mr. Benjamin smiled. "Why slander poor dead Leon's memory? Why concoct so complicated an explanation?" His face shone with joy. "Can't you see what happened? To grant the good man Peretz his wish for a resting place in Jerusalem, the Almighty miraculously exchanged his body for the miser's, its belly stuffed with diamonds. Realizing what has happened, Elazar tracks his master's body here and steals the diamonds, killing Leon in the process. It's that simple." He rose to take his leave.

Ganelon stood to shake the man's hand. "A miracle may be a simple explanation for you. It's a very complex one for me."

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At the door Mr. Benjamin turned back, his smile clouded by wonder. "The only puzzle in this whole business," he said, "is how Elazar, knowing a miracle had taken place, could still go on to rob and commit murder."

As the door closed, Ganelon sat back down and stared at the spot where he'd traced the complicated pattern a few moments before. Then he smeared his hand across the rug as if to destroy what was left of his little tissue of lies.

Afterward he took his operative's report and reread the postscript, which he had not communicated to Mr. Benjamin because it had no bearing on the Peretz matter. His operative had written: "P.S., As I left Alexandria I received this answer from Brother Cesari to your question regarding Fong's antipathy toward the Dominion of Canada. He advised you: 'Remember the usurping Empress Wu.' "

Ganelon drummed his fingers on the desk. The usurping Empress Wu? The usurping Empress Wu? Then he remembered how the usurping Empress Wu, having taught a parrot and a cat to eat together out of the same dish, believed she had brought about the millenium. And was that why Fong feared Canada? Was he afraid that this yoking together of the French and the English, if successful, might bring about an end to time?

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a *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

Dewey had put off writing a will, even though the subject had been mentioned more than once. Like almost everybody, he must have believed that his death would take place some time in the distant future. But death, of course, happens now. . . .

DEWEY DIES

by WILLIAM BANKIER

There was a time when Dewey Porterfield had a bit part, it seemed, in every other movie that came out of Hollywood. But as a child actor, he suffered a huge disappointment. He wanted to be one of the young brothers in the classic film *Beau Geste*. Another boy was chosen for the role, and Dewey never got over it.

Many of his films were crime stories. Sam Glover realized, when he put down the telephone after talking to Dewey's sister in New Orleans, that the present situation was becoming like one of those movies. The hostility. The urge to kill.

Sam took a large brass key from his pocket—the key he'd used to let himself in the front door of Dewey's cottage on Bayou Drive, one of the nicest streets in Solarville. Sam recalled the day last year when Dewey handed him the key. Carl Stimson and Ralph Mitchell were in the room. Dewey gave each of them a key as well.

"You'll be old some day yourselves," the former actor told his friends at the time. They smiled because, while Dewey Porterfield was seventy-eight years old, Carl was sixty-six, Ralph was sixty-four and Sam Glover, the kid, was fifty-nine. "I'm losing my balance once in a while," Dewey went on. "When I'm down, it's hard to get up. I'll feel more secure if you guys can let yourselves in and check on me."

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On that occasion, Ralph was dealing. "The name of the game is seven-card stud," he said. "Deuces and low-in-the-hole wild." It was a regular meeting of the Sundowners. They were sipping beer and eating pretzels, a diet of alcohol and salt. Last year, the old men had decided to supplement their prescribed blood-pressure medications with a regimen of self-indulgence. "When you're happy and relaxed," Ralph had said, "healthy chemicals come out of your glands." It seemed to be working.

The alliance called the Sundowners was formed by Dewey Porterfield several years ago, after his wife died. That was a sad time. His sister Marla and her husband, Jack the lawyer, never even came. It was only a two-hour drive from New Orleans but she stayed away. She said it was because Dewey insisted on having an open-coffin funeral with the casket on display for two days at the house. Marla said it was morbid but Dewey said it was what his wife wanted. It would probably be what he wanted when his time came.

It was always cooler inside the house than outside, with the giant oak tree providing so much shade. It was nice in there, far more comfortable and impressive than the small houses Sam and Ralph and Carl could afford. Dewey's kitchen had a flagstone floor. His staircase curved to the upper landing like something Merle Oberon ought to come drifting down. And the trophy room was crowded with souvenirs of the many countries to which Dewey had traveled on location.

Suddenly a widower in his early sixties, Dewey saw to it that the big old house did not become lonely. He organized the Sundowners so that there was laughter in the rooms, and sometimes shouting. And smells of beer and whisky and tobacco smoke. Or garlic and charred steak when he lit the gas stove in the kitchen.

The Sundowners had been having fun for years when Sam Glover showed up in Solarville. Sam and his twin brother Pete were residents of Algonquin Landing in upstate New York. Their barbershop, Glover Brothers, did well even when the salons came along with their shampoo and blow-dry. Some customers could not tell the twins apart. Sam used to say, "I'm the one with the claustrophobia." It was true. Couple of times a day, he would excuse himself, leave the tiny shop, and stand outside, breathing deeply until his heart stopped pounding.

Neither brother married. Both carried general life insurance with the other as beneficiary. When Pete died in a car accident, Sam was suddenly elevated to a position where he would never have to work

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again. So he sold the shop and moved away from the long winters. But after six years in Solarville, he still missed the autumn leaves.

They were lucky with their chemistry, the four old men. Only Ralph Mitchell, the retired schoolteacher, had a wife. Anita was tolerant of her husband's devotion to his friends. She played bridge and golf with cronies of her own. Carl Stimson, who was once a draftsman, had a tendency to drink too much. The others rode herd on him.

Their outside activity was lawn bowling. Twice a week, they clustered at one end of the green, angular in pale clothes and floppy-brimmed hats, stooping to send a lopsided ball scudding across the turf, getting up slowly. When they took on a rival quartet, the Sundowners were fiercely competitive.

Otherwise, they did most of their congregating in Dewey Porterfield's cottage. There were the poker games, the bull sessions. And when PBS had on a good British drama, they would fall asleep in deep chairs in front of the screen. Their lives seemed set to last forever, like a childhood summer.

Then, Dewey died. Sam Glover found his friend in bed with a contented smile on his face. It must have been a pleasant dream. Sam telephoned Ralph and asked him to give Carl the bad news.

Ralph said, "And you get to call sister Marla. Her number is in the book on the end table by the blue sofa."

Sam dialed the New Orleans number. Jack the lawyer answered. Sam identified himself and asked for Marla. She came on in character.

"Well?"

"Sorry to bring you bad news. Dewey passed away in his sleep last night."

"That's all I needed."

"You'll be relieved to know he did not suffer."

"Is he doing that thing with the casket in the house? Like with his wife?"

"He's not doing anything right now. But since you mention it, yes. That's what he wanted."

"There's nothing in writing. I know that for a fact."

It was true. Dewey had put off writing a will, even though the subject had been mentioned more than once. Like almost everybody, he must have believed that his death would take place some time in the distant future. But death, of course, happens now.

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"Don't worry," Sam said, "we'll be taking care of the arrangements."

"When is the funeral?"

"Let's say Saturday afternoon. This is Thursday. I'll call the undertaker. Dewey can be at home to visitors tomorrow and Saturday morning. If there's any change, I'll call you."

There was no change. The funeral director agreed to the proposed schedule. Sam and Ralph and Carl visited the showroom and chose an expensive mahogany casket. "Everything but the white sidewalls," Ralph said.

Sam slept poorly that night. Partly it was dread of Marla's arrival the next day or on Saturday morning. The worst thing about Dewey's passing was his sister's taking over. For disruption, it ranked with the recent failure of the system in the U.S.S.R. But the main reason for Sam's insomnia was empathy. As he lay there, he could not avoid thinking that Dewey Porterfield had closed his eyes just like this in bed last night. And never opened them again.

Dawn! Bird song! Sam could not recall what he had been worried about. He showered and shaved and put on clothes. He was eating his cereal when he thought about Dewey's house key. No need to keep it now. When Marla arrived, he would turn it over. The act would be satisfying, a formal cessation of the relationship. "Here you are, and I'm looking forward to having no further dealings with you."

Rinsing his bowl at the sink, Sam had a thought. Perhaps he should use the key one more time. On a shelf in Dewey's trophy room, there was a primitive ivory carving of a water buffalo. The actor had brought it back from the Congo after making a film there many years ago. Sam had always admired it. There was no hope of Marla giving it to him once she took over. If he was going to have it as a memento of the years with Dewey, he had better go and get it now.

From sun to shade, Sam moved under the canopy of leaves enshrouding the green verandah. His key slipped in, the lock turned, he was inside. On his way past the sitting room, he saw the velvet-covered trestles placed in readiness by the undertaker's men for the arrival of Dewey in his ostentatious box at ten o'clock.

Sam hurried upstairs. He entered the trophy room and switched on a light. There was the ivory buffalo, its front legs splayed, mas-

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sive head lowered for a charge, the broad curved horns parted in the middle. It felt comfortable in his hands. "Thanks, Dewey," he said. "We had good times."

A sharp sound brought him to the landing at the head of the stairs. Light spilled across the carpet below as the front door opened. Carl Stimson let himself in and closed the door. "Carl!" he called in a cathedral whisper.

The retired draftsman's feet left the floor as he rose in the air like a man in a cartoon. He saw his friend above him. He fell against the wall with a hand covering his heart.

"Sorry! Are you doing what I'm doing?" Sam displayed the water buffalo.

"Yes. I came for that book of ancient recipes from Singapore."

"Come and get it. Dewey would want you to."

With their trophies in hand, the friends entered the ground floor den, scene of the weekly card games. Here they helped themselves to Dewey's sixteen-year-old whisky. They were sipping and still whispering when they heard a key in the front door lock. They called out in unison, "In here, Ralph!"

Mitchell's grey crewcut appeared in the doorway. "Pour me one," he said. "I'm going to get myself that polished quartz jar old Dewey brought back from Nova Scotia."

An hour passed easily during which the men toasted their absent friend and recalled trivial information associated with Dewey Porterfield. His irrational fear of ants. His belief that the designated hitter was part of a secret attempt to destroy baseball. His refusal to watch MTV if they were playing rap. His insistence that the only good peanut was a jumbo redskin.

"I saw the movie this was in," Ralph said, fondling the quartz jar that caught light and separated it like a prism.

"Remember him telling us how he wanted to be in *Beau Geste* but they cast somebody else?" Carl said.

"That was one fine film."

"Dewey used to talk about the Viking funeral the boys put on when they were kids. He loved the way the surviving brother staged a funeral pyre outside the desert fort at the end," Ralph said. Then he asked, "Did you order cremation for Dewey?"

Sam Glover, who was in charge of arrangements, said, "I couldn't do it. I know he said he wanted it. But I decided we need a grave where we can go and visit him."

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The friends nodded in silence. "It's going against his wishes," Sam added. "I feel a little guilty. But he's dead now. He won't know."

At ten-thirty, Dewey was delivered home for the last time. The undertaker's men wheeled in the casket and lifted it onto the trestles. Baskets of flowers were arranged around the room. A guest book was set up on a portable lectern with a pen on a string. The Sundowners stared at their deceased friend. "Nice haircut," Sam said. "Finally got him to hold still for it."

They returned to the den for another drink. Some time later, Sam was the one who said, "It's a hell of a note. All this comfort reverting to the wicked sister of the East."

Ralph stirred his whisky with a finger. "He never made a will. She's the only living relative. What can we do?"

"What if Dewey wrote a will?" Sam suggested.

"He didn't. We advised him to. He never got around to it."

"What if he did? A plain old holographic will. A simple page of paper in an old man's creaky handwriting. Dated two weeks ago. He could have done it." Sam emptied his glass and wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "I say he did."

"Where is it?" Carl asked.

"You haven't written it yet," Sam told him. "You're a draftsman, draft us a will. Check his desk for samples of his writing. We'll find the document . . ." Sam glanced around ". . . scrolled up in that nice quartz jar. Dewey left it there knowing we'd come across it."

They looked at each other. Sam said, "I believe it." And the others echoed, "I believe it."

They could not find any examples of Dewey's handwriting. The desk was bare of penmanship. Sam ended up saying they would have to fake it. "Do it as trembly as you can," he advised Carl. "As if he was not well when he composed it."

Carl Stimson wasted only three pages of notepaper getting the document right. He wrote with his left hand. They invented the language together. "I, Dewey Porterfield, being of sound mind and body and in anticipation of my death, do hereby set down my last will and testament. My house at 17 Bayou Drive and its contents, I bequeath to my three loyal friends, Sam Glover, Carl Stimson, and Ralph Mitchell, on the understanding that they will continue to hold frequent meetings therein of the Sundowners. And on the further understanding that, in games of stud poker, low-in-the-hole shall be the only wild card. No deuces, treys, or one-eyed jacks.

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"As for my sister, Marla Porterfield Tobias, I hereby leave her the contents of my two accounts at the Solarville Savings and Loan." The men had heard Dewey refer to the accounts. "These are my true wishes, and to them I set my signature." The signature followed and a date ten days ago.

"Why leave her anything?" Ralph asked.

"If she's not even mentioned, we're inviting her to contest the will in court," Carl said. "Let her have the money, we don't need it."

"Fold the paper a few times," Sam said. "Make it look as if he worked over it and reread it."

"What if she has it checked and finds our fingerprints?"

"That's okay. We found it when Ralph collected the jar Dewey wanted him to have. We all handled it." And they did.

Marla Porterfield Tobias arrived at half-past eleven. Sam answered the door and brought her into the den. She sniffed the air. "When did my brother get a liquor license?"

Ralph made a movement towards the bar. "Want a drink, Mrs. Tobias?"

"All I want is you three out of my house," she said.

"Excuse me, but you're wrong about that," Sam said. "Could you hand me the will, Carl?"

"What will? My brother left no will."

"Actually, he did. We found it this morning. In his own handwriting."

"How interesting," Marla said.

"In this jar," Ralph said.

Her hand trembled as she scanned the lines. Then she said, and there was a smile at the corner of her mouth, "Which one of you composed this satire?"

"Your husband is a lawyer," Carl murmured. "You should know better than to utter slander."

"He is, indeed, a lawyer." She folded the document and placed it on a table. "But we won't even need him. Dewey never said anything about leaving the house to you three. Last time I spoke to him I nagged him about having Jack draw up a will. He said there was no hurry."

"He must have had a premonition of mortality. In the wee small hours of the morning."

"I happen to know you people are behind this," Marla said. She reached the doorway. "You will regret it. We may even send you to

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jail." The smile faded. "I'm not joking. We'll bring you guys up on a charge of forgery."

The elderly threesome were taken aback. Marla seemed so confident. Her husband was a lawyer. Prison terms, even short ones, were not to be contemplated.

"Would you like to go in and have some time with your brother?" Sam asked.

"I hate it that he's on display like that. All of you, him included, are barbaric. I'm going upstairs. I intend to check the rooms against my mental inventory. See what items have been stolen."

"The will didn't even phase her." The Sundowners were too shaken to refill their glasses. "We'll be refused permission to enter the house."

"We could hold our meetings at my place," Ralph said.

"It isn't the same," Carl told him. "No offense."

"She has to be killed," Sam Glover decided. The threat of a prison sentence had pushed him over the edge. His claustrophobia would never let him survive a day behind bars.

There was a long silence. Then Ralph said, "Murder?"

"Right now. Before she has time to talk to Jack the lawyer."

"Isn't that a little drastic?"

"Why should she be allowed to go to law and keep us out of here? She never visited Dewey. She wasn't as close to him as we were. He didn't even like her." Sam went to the desk and picked up a souvenir horseshoe. He slapped it against his palm. "No way Dewey would have wanted Marla to inherit his property."

"He's right," Carl said. "We'd be fulfilling Dewey's unspoken wish."

"We'd be caught," Ralph warned. "They'd put us in jail."

"She says she'll do that anyway," Sam told him. "The trick is to act spontaneously. Act now."

Three sharp old minds worked in silence. After a while, Carl snapped his fingers. "We fake a suicide! Head inside the gas oven. We get her drunk and put her in. I'll write a suicide note. She's despondent over her brother's death."

"Too many forgeries," Ralph said. He was rummaging in the bottom drawer of Dewey's desk. "I have a better idea. A dark, bushy-haired intruder comes into the house. The one who commits all the unsolved murders. Marla confronts him. He shoots her." Ralph produced a revolver. "Here's the weapon. Dewey's old handgun. The

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intruder escapes. We could identify him if the police ever find him."

"Take a look," Sam said. "The gun is not loaded."

It was true. Ralph began searching the drawers for ammo.

Sam went on, "Simple is best. An accident. Let her fall downstairs and break her neck. That's a terrific flight of stairs. She's already up there. I'll be glad to push her from the landing. If the first time is not fatal, I'll be more than pleased to carry her back up and send her down a second time."

"That's gruesome."

"It's the only way."

"Let's use the gun. This is America."

"Suicide, gentlemen. The gas oven. We don't kill her, she kills herself."

The argument continued. These were three people who had trouble agreeing on the name of the game when a poker hand was to be dealt.

"Time is a-wasting," Carl said, heading out of the room. "I'm going to check the oven."

Just as the draftsman vanished, Ralph called out, "Eureka!" He held up a box of cartridges, then began loading the gun.

"I'll say it again," Sam insisted. "Simple is best." He hurried from the den and began taking the stairs two at a time, in search of Marla Porterfield Tobias. He found her in the trophy room.

"The vultures have been active in here," she said.

"Dewey wanted us to have certain things we admired."

"I admire Texas but I can't have it."

"The quartz jar that stood right here," Sam said, indicating a clean circle on a dusty shelf, "was where he put the will. He knew Ralph would find it when he came to claim his jar." The barber's hands were moist, his heart was pounding. Would he be able to push this woman down the stairs? Talk was one thing, action another.

"Your so-called will is a joke." Marla glanced at her watch. "I have to go. I don't want to be here when the villagers start arriving to admire the remains." She left the room so quickly Sam had to run after her. He overtook her on the landing at the head of the stairs.

"Wait," he appealed. "I have to ask you something."

"What?" She uttered the word with such impatience, the *t*-sound echoed from the skylight.

Sam had nothing to ask her. His mind searched desperately for something to say. "This cut," he said finally, showing her where he

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had jabbed himself accidentally with the scissors while trimming his nails a few days ago. "Do you think it's infected?"

"Get away from me!" Marla placed the palm of one hand against his chicken chest and gave him a shove as she turned away. Sam tottered backwards, the wooden railing caught him below the seat of his baggy pants, and he fell over.

"Yeow!" Demonstrating agility he did not realize he still possessed, Sam managed to twist sideways and grab hold of one of the carved posts. There he dangled in space above the vestibule floor thirty feet below while Dewey's sister ran to help him.

"Hold on!" she yelled. "I've got you." She seized both his wrists in a robot grip, but that was not much use unless she intended to drag him between the uprights. "Keep holding on for just a second, I'm letting go." And she did, standing up and leaning over the railing to grasp him with both hands under one armpit. Sam did not weigh much and Marla, at sixty-three, was still strong. Within seconds, she hauled him over the railing to safety.

That was when Carl Stimson ran through the doorway leading from the kitchen. He turned round and round like a cat getting ready to lie down. He was holding a porcelain handle. "Sam! Sam! The knob came off the gas control!" He looked up and saw his friend in the arms of Marla Porterfield Tobias. "I was getting ready to roast a chicken," he explained.

"Is there gas?"

"Of course there's gas."

"That's a bad thing, Carl."

The side door leading to the garden creaked open. Ralph Mitchell crept in, bent almost double, with Dewey's revolver held in front of him. He seemed surprised to see Carl with his oven handle. Glancing up to the landing, he observed his fellow conspirator still in the arms of the enemy. The lethal weapon in his hand demanded some explanation. "I saw a bushy-haired intruder outside," he said. Then he sniffed the air. "Gas!" he cried.

Carl could not have agreed more. "Gas!" he confirmed, racing down the corridor to the kitchen. Ralph ran after him brandishing the gun, as if ready to shoot the gas. Sam and Marla began hurrying down the stairs.

They arrived in the kitchen a few steps behind the other two. The stench of gas in here was intense. Carl was making frantic attempts to fit the porcelain knob back in place. Ralph said, "We'd better get some fresh air in here." As he moved to the back door, his heel

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slipped on the flagstone floor. He lost his balance and almost fell, releasing the gun, which described an arc before landing on the stone surface and discharging one shot.

The sparks ignited the gas. There was a minor explosion which took the form of the word "Whump!" The window and the glass in the door blew outwards. The four inhabitants of the room were deafened and shocked. A few moments elapsed before they noticed the flames at the curtains. The ancient paneled wall was blistering and beginning to burn.

"Get the fire extinguisher," Marla commanded.

"In all the times we came back here for beer and tonic water," Sam said, "did anybody ever see a fire extinguisher?"

"There is no fire extinguisher," Ralph concluded.

"Get water from the sink," was Marla's next instruction. The flames were beginning to crackle, starting to have fun.

"I have a better idea," Carl said. "Let's get out of here. And call the fire department."

The men in helmets and yellow coats did their best. But they arrived too late to rescue anything from inside. The two-story dwelling, as old and dried out as its owner, was beyond saving. The flames had chased everybody down the hallway and leaped the stairway to the landing where Sam had so recently tried to take Marla's life, and she had saved his.

"My house is burning down," she wailed from the front lawn where she and the Sundowners and several neighbors were watching the conflagration.

"*Our* house is burning down," Sam said helplessly, attempting to maintain legal precedent.

One week later, the three surviving friends got together for drinks at Ralph's place. Nobody felt like playing cards.

"Just like Dewey," Sam said, "not to have gotten around to renewing his fire insurance."

"It saves us legal embarrassment with his sister," Ralph offered. "The house is a write-off. It'll cost a fortune to clear the ruins and rebuild. We can't afford to do it. Leave it to Marla."

Carl said, "I'm glad that phony will I wrote got burned up. What a wicked lady. She could have told us the truth as soon as we showed it to her. But she preferred the chance of bringing in the authorities. We would have been exposed."

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Ralph nodded thoughtfully. "I was stunned when Marla finally opened up," he said. "Imagine Dewey going all those years and being too embarrassed to tell us. He was dyslexic."

"He would have hired a lawyer to write his will," Carl said. "He would never have tried to do it himself."

Sam handed his glass to Ralph for a refill. "Well, he ended up with the performance of a lifetime," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the finish was just like in *Beau Geste*. Dewey got to star in his Viking funeral."

DETECTIVERSE

AN UNDERWORLD STORY

by STANLEY COHEN

Pittsburgh Samarkand was a hood
Who took my money and said he would
And most sincerely thought he could.
But the sight of the chicken chickened his heart
The same as mine from the very start
Which (sure!) is the reason I gave him the job.
I thought I could count on the sniveling slob.

So Pittsburgh ups and marries the dame
And now he moans at the sound of my name.
They blew the roll I paid for the hit
By touring the tables and wheels a bit.
True she's onto me but I'm onto him
And better I'm twenty-five gees into him
And she loves him so I've got them.

I spent my dough and got peace of mind
And most unexpected—the job was refined.

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Alice Anderson is the author of two children's stories published by E.P. Dutton. She worked as an actress before turning her hand to fiction writing—touring with the USO in World War II and later appearing in summer stock, and in New York. The following story shows her talent for creating full-blown characters in a very few words. . . .

BONES

by ALICE ANDERSON

Mary sat in their canoe. Mattie's dead body lay at her feet. She told herself not to lose courage now. All she had to do was reach down, make a grab, and heave her sister over the side.

"You'll be food for fishies, Mattie." The words sang in her head.

Panic, which she hadn't felt until this moment, made her hands tremble. As though they had their own volition, her fingers refused to close in around the sheet-wrapped corpse.

She turned for relief from the heat of her emotions towards the full white moon reflected in the water. It pulsed with the tide and washed against the side of the boat. Living, dead, living, dead, the water echoed. Further from her, closer to shore, sporting fishes leaped from their water beds—there was one, there another—then slipped soundlessly back into their wet berths. What a pity she and Mattie hadn't come out on the lake in the deep of night before.

Now get serious, she said to herself. Probably a body becomes heavier as rigor-whatever sets in. Why was she turning chicken now? Everything had gone without a hitch; she'd carried out exactly what she'd planned. After Mattie had gone to sleep she'd put a blanket over her face and pressed it down against her nose and mouth. Before the life went out of her, Mattie had let out a throttling noise. It had sounded like someone trying to start up a stalled car. It was overdone, theatrical, but that was like Mattie. As you live, so you die, Mary thought. Mattie always had her dramatic ways.

It was surprising that her body had been so light when she dragged it in its sheet, looking like yesterday's laundry, down the

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stairs, outside, and across the lawn. At first she'd been clumsy when she tried to push Mattie down into the narrow bottom of the canoe, but that didn't last. A rush of super energy came into her body when she really realized she had put an end to her sister. For once she'd done what she wanted to do and not just thought about it.

Why was she going weak in her knees now? It wouldn't do.

She leaned down over the corpse, ready to send Mattie sailing, when she remembered the bag of carpenter's tools she'd put in the canoe earlier that day. They were to make the body sink. Her resolve returned. She tied them around Mattie's middle.

She sat back down in her seat and took a calm breath. Wait. Her heart pounded. What was that? Something, or someone, moved along the shore close to their dock. Terror pushed the air from her belly. Her arms felt constricted. No, it wasn't anyone, it was only the softly stirring branches of a weeping willow tree.

That tree had been there ever since Mary and Mattie had come as children to this community of summer cottages surrounding Lake Tagwon. After the death of their parents they continued to spend each summer here by themselves. Mattie married a local boy, Cal, a tall test pilot with blue eyes. He died six months after their wedding when his plane crashed into the Florida Everglades.

Mary and Mattie winterized the cottage and lived there year-round. They were in their forties now. Mattie was a year and a half older. Mary was frequently taken for the older sister, and she resented it.

Whenever they talked to neighbors across the lawn, or friends in town at Mildred's Lunch Place, people feasted their eyes on Mattie. They didn't listen to Mary when she spoke about her aches and pains and how ignoring them gave her an enriching experience. She tried again and again to tell them about her inner growth, but their attention was on Mattie. They watched her make her extravagant gestures and smile her oh-so-sunny smile.

Conversation always turned to the same old thing, hydrilla weed. Did Mattie think the lake needed dredging in order to get rid of it? Wasn't it growing close to shore? Mary thought they talked so much about hydrilla because they refused to face the weeds and disorders in their own lives. Wasn't the hydrilla spreading! That's what they talked about.

Mary knew she'd always been more searching and serious than Mattie, who was kind of a lightweight. Even when they were children their mother used to say she could listen and know which little

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girl was coming downstairs. Mattie's footsteps sounded like a puppy dog, while Mary's were more like an elephant. Not very flattering to Mary, of course, but then, who could possibly have any substance if their steps weren't firm.

Mary itemized each comparison with Mattie, spoken or sensed. She remembered it all. It became a burden she couldn't put down. It ate at her. There were times when the weight of her thoughts seemed to make her stagger when she walked.

Now wait, she told herself. There was someone moving down on the shore beyond the weeping willow. No. No. She was being foolish. It was just branches from trees fluttering in the night.

She and Mattie never quarreled, but a thick tension sometimes built up between them. Before it broke out into anger, Mattie, half playfully, would put her face up close to Mary's, look her straight in the eye, and chant, "Give me my bones." This served as a cue for them to back off from each other. They took their meals separately and stopped speaking. If they were in the same room they ignored each other. After a time, once it was over a month, Mattie would look up at Mary and smile. Or she might bring her a sandwich and sit by Mary's side at lunchtime. Little by little, perhaps refreshed by their distancing, they returned to more companionable ways.

The phrase about the bones hadn't much logic to it. They'd picked it up as children one Halloween evening when their parents took them, in their pajamas, to story hour at the library. A large woman told a spooky story about a little old woman who went walking in a cemetery at night. She saw a bone sticking up from a grave and she picked it up, took it home, and put it in her cupboard. That night a voice woke her from her sleep crying out, "Give me my bone."

After this happened several nights in a row, the little old woman sat up in her bed and shouted, "Take it." The cupboard door flew open, and the next morning when the little old woman looked, the bone was gone.

Mattie had laughed at the story, but it had frightened Mary. So Mattie teased her when they were children. She lay under Mary's bed and waited until she was asleep, when she'd cry out, "Give me my bone."

The boat was drifting. She took up her paddle and brought it more nearly back to the center of the lake. Hydrilla weeds scratched at the sides of the canoe.

Wait, she told herself. Wasn't there someone down there, close to their dock? Terror clutched at her heart. This time it spurred her to

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action; she had to get rid of the body. She bent down and lifted Mattie up, feet first—Mattie's were a good half size larger than her own—and pushed her up and over into the water. She made barely a splash.

Mary leaned over the side of the canoe. How quickly the dark water swallowed up the body. She was thrilled. It was done.

"GIVE ME MY BONES."

Mary froze. That was Mattie's voice. A ghost so soon?

"GIVE ME MY BONES." The voice was louder than before.

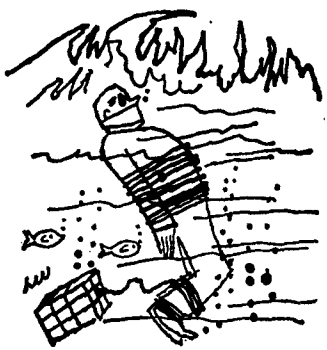
Mary stood up in the canoe. Who was there?

Again she heard "GIVE ME MY BONES."

Mary flung her arms up as if to knock the words away before they hit her. "Take them," she shouted, but lost her balance and fell head first into the lake.

The next morning three men went out fishing on the lake in a rowboat. They came across Mary's bloated body tangled in hydrilla. What was strange, they thought, was a rag figure with a rubber face, dressed in a nightgown, that was nestled close to Mary's side.

Most perplexing to her neighbors was the manner in which Mattie showed her grief. She walked up and down in front of her dock, laughing and crying and making a strange throttling noise. It sounded for all the world like someone trying to start up a stalled car.



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a *NEW* short story by

FLORENCE V. MAYBERRY

In 1968, in his introduction to her story "Bitter Vetch," Ellery Queen had this to say about Florence Mayberry's writing: "(She) has an unusual, perhaps remarkable talent for creating women characters—especially 'disturbed' women—women who get under your skin. You may not like them, you may not even understand them, but they seize your mind and dreams, and hang on no matter how hard you try to shake them off . . ." Miz Sammy is no exception. . . .

MIZ SAMMY'S HONOR

by FLORENCE V. MAYBERRY

Every night at six I went for the milk. On the stroke of six. Miz Sammy was exact about this. Miz Sammy was exact about everything and everyone, with one exception. The exception was Old Drunk Tom Canady, her good-for-nothing husband. What she saw in him, only the Lord and Miz Sammy knew.

Except, maybe, me, only nobody ever asked me since I was only around nine years old. One time Miz Sammy was showing me her heirlooms in her parlor and she picked up this tinted photograph of the prettiest grown-up boy I ever saw. That boy had big blue eyes, curly black hair, pink cheeks, and a daredevil smile. I asked, "Is this your boy?" And Miz Sammy said, soft as silk whispering against silk, "No, no, I've got no children. This is Mr. Canady. Taken a long time ago, soon after I first met him."

Long time or not, it was hard to believe that pretty boy could turn into the bloated, whiskery giant I'd seen staggering around town. Some folks said he drank because he came out of white trash, was only a river boat cabin boy Miz Sammy had met up with that time

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she traveled by boat from St. Louis down the Mississippi to visit her folks in New Orleans. But along with that they did give a little sympathy for Old Drunk Tom, declared it could be a mite hard to live with high-handed quality like Miz Sammy, especially since her folks before they all died off never spoke a word to him after Miz Sammy married him. To Miz Sammy, they did, she was blood kin, but right in church one time her old daddy was heard praying out loud, "Thank You, Lord, for making my daughter barren."

Hard to blame the old man, my Grandma said afterwards, because Drunk Tom was just plain no good. If it hadn't been Miz Sammy was quality, and a scorcher when she was mad, Tom Canady might have been rode out of town on a rail. He was mean in a fight, all right, carried a big knife, but there were plenty of stout men in our Missouri River town could've handled him.

Persnickety as Miz Sammy was, once I got to her house on time and once she gave me to understand she had seen to it the milk was also ready on the dot, waiting in the cool downstairs in the cellar, she often took her time about telling Poncey, her Negro hired boy, to fill my pail. Miz Sammy liked to talk to me, and I liked to listen. Lots of times she showed me her heirlooms. She was mighty proud of being a Blair. "Good blood brings honor, and nothing's more important than honor. Mind that, Louisa. Honor. Pay your just debts, don't be beholden to nobody. I may have to sell milk by the pint to pay mine, but they're paid, once I know where they're at." She probably meant by this any stray debt she hadn't heard about, run up by Old Tom whenever he could talk some fool into trusting him. "Just remember, Louisa, always hold your head high by keeping yourself square with the world. We Blairs ended up poor as Job's turkeys, but we had honor. Or else."

"Or else what, Miz Sammy?"

"We disowned 'em," she said flatly.

I was known as a saucebox at home, and it was on the tip of my tongue to ask how this fitted in with Old Drunk Tom who didn't have anything, especially honor, what with charging up whiskey to Miz Sammy and getting her into debt she didn't know anything about. But maybe she figured if she finally found out and got them paid, why that kept Old Tom's head high.

I loved Miz Sammy's stories about the old days. About her granddaddy, Colonel Nelson Bedlington Blair, who had held a big chunk of the Missouri River country solid for the Confederacy. "He built this house, used to be a regular palace, parlor filled with fine furni-

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ture, handmade lace curtains on the windows, outside the lawn scythed smooth as velvet, parties with lanterns hanging from the trees, my mama decked out with real pearls, servants everywhere to take care of everything. And then that dratted war came. My granddaddy and daddy both fought in it."

She would sigh, and one night she said, "This house still has traces of that past time. In this very house, down cellar, there's a cell we never tore out, where granddaddy kept runaway slaves."

"Did your folks help 'em get free?" I asked.

"Land's sake, no! My granddaddy caught 'em, held 'em for their owners." Proudly, "We Blairs fought for the Confederacy, we were born and bred Southerners."

"I'm a Yankee," I said. "My grandpa freed the slaves. He did it in the Civil War when he was young. So if he'd been here then, he would have unlocked those slaves."

"Take your damned milk and scat home!" Miz Sammy shouted.

But that was just Miz Sammy's way. By the time Poncey got up the cellar stairs with the milk, she was feeding me sugar cookies and promising to show me the cell, iron bars and all, one of these days when she felt like climbing the stairs. Neither was I mad. All I cared about was getting a look at that cell. Imagine! Having your very own jail!

Miz Sammy was tall, close to six feet. She wasn't fat, but she was big. She had a proud lift to her head, and a figure that was all woman. Not that this meant anything to me back then. I was only nine and a girl besides.

Her blue eyes were wide-set. They could look deep into a person, but mostly they didn't. They just looked on Miz Sammy's own ideas. Her nose was straight and strong. And her mouth—I didn't like people hugging and kissing me, my mother said I was a "touch-me-not"—but I used to hope that sometime Miz Sammy would kiss me. Her mouth looked like if it kissed, the kiss would stay for keeps.

My mother said Miz Sammy would be handsome if she'd fix up. But lots of folks around town snickered about the men's clothes she wore when she worked in the cow barn or in the garden with Poncey. Behind her back, that is. Not to her face. When Miz Sammy got mad you could hear her cuss clear from her house surrounded by a two-acre lawn to the middle of town. Once when some white boys teased Poncey, she grabbed a couple and bounced their heads together. The fathers of the boys talked like they might join up and go have it out with Miz Sammy, but that never got farther than talk at the front

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stoop of the drugstore. Miz Sammy was the daughter of Judge Courtney Blair, who was the son of Colonel Nelson Bedlington Blair. Our town was named Blairsville.

I always liked it when Miz Sammy's stories concentrated on those days when she was still rich. Everybody knew Old Drunk Tom had used up the money her daddy left her. But some folks swore she still had the family's diamond rings, fine gold jewelry, even her mama's pearl necklace hid out in her cellar. That whetted me up to get down cellar, maybe find where the treasure was. But even more than that I wanted to see that slave cell.

On this particular late-afternoon, a hot summer evening when it hadn't rained for weeks, I ran to Miz Sammy's house, the milk bucket banging my bare legs. I stopped at the corner of the house and peeked around it to catch Poncey's signal. With Miz Sammy, it was as bad to be early as late. So Poncey always hung his red bandana on the outside knob of the back screen when it was exactly the time. Then, before I went inside, I would fold it up nice for him and hide it away.

The bandana was there, gently lifting in the breeze that was springing up. I tiptoed to the door, removed the bandana, and stuffed it down by the steps. Then I knocked on the porch screen and went inside.

The wooden striking clock on the shelf back of Miz Sammy's head said about a minute past six. Miz Sammy looked at the clock and then at me. "Well, Louisa?" she said, then squinted her big blue eyes and leaned forward. "What's that blood doing on your hand, Miss? You fall and hurt yourself?"

Startled, I looked at my hand. Blood streaked the back of my fingers. "No," I said. "I didn't know it was there."

"No, *ma'am!*" Miz Sammy bawled. "What's the matter with your mother, not teaching you manners? Now that she's a widow, she ought to be learning how to be mother and father to you both and take you in hand."

"Don't you talk about my mother!" I said, banging the milk bucket on the table. I must have been a sight, skinny and freckled, my eyes glaring both mad and scared.

"I ought to blister you," Miz Sammy answered back, but very mild. "Go wash that blood off your hand. Poncey! Where did that dratted boy go? Poncey!"

I was standing by the window washing my hands and saw Poncey come out of his little cabin that was a few steps beyond the back

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porch of the big house. He had a white rag on his right hand with a big red splotch on it. Miz Sammy was hanging over my shoulder, looking too. When she spoke, no fight was in her voice. "I didn't know you were hurt, Poncey. You hurt bad?"

"No'm. Hit not deep, jist sprangled out."

"Come here and let me fix it. Right now, hear!" She turned to me with a curious, watchful expression. "How'd you get that blood on you, Louisa?"

I knew how. Off Poncey's red bandana. "I guess I got too hot running to be on time and my nose bled a little. I didn't carry a handkerchief."

She frowned. "Yes? Hum-m-m, well I'll pour out your milk and you better hike on home."

She took my bucket and opened the door which led to the cellar where the milk pans were kept in the cool. "Stay here, mind, don't follow me!" she ordered sharply and shut the door hard behind her. She was back up in a few minutes and came out on the back stoop to watch me go. I felt her watching me like it was a shove. She made me stiffen and get so knock-kneed I almost tripped.

That's why I noticed the blood, from watching how I stepped. Big scattered drops of it led from the stoop to the outside cellar door which slanted against the house foundation. The cellar door was padlocked. Beside the padlock there was a splat of blood on the white paint.

On the way home I had to pass the old brick church which had been built by the Blair family before the Civil War. It was so run-down, bricks at its corners sloughing away, that it was no longer used. In the early twilight it had a brooding, scary look, as though all the dead people who had once attended it were hiding inside in the dimness to grab anyone who intruded on their church. It didn't help to see the ancient slave cemetery in back of it, its few moss-grown grave markers sticking up like snaggle teeth.

I ran past the church. By the time I reached home, I was out of breath, and milk had trickled between the pail and its lid from being swung.

"Landamercy," Grandma said. "The Booger Man after you?"

My mother came out of our room, brushing her hair. I knew she and Grandma were fixing to go to a social. "That goose chase you again?" She meant the old gander who had staked out a bug patch at the end of our lane. "If you'd face up to that goose with a switch,

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you could drive him off. You can't go around all your life being afraid."

What I said next, I didn't mean to say. "You'd run too. Because somebody's just been killed in Miz Sammy's cellar."

"Law, law!" Grandpa said, and shook his head in mock wonder.

"Shame on you, making up such tales," Grandma said.

"If anybody got in Miz Sammy's way, I wouldn't put it past her," Mama put in. "But who'd be silly enough to do that? Except, of course, that good-for-nothing husband of hers."

"Hum-m-m." This was Grandma, a deep back-of-the-head look in her eyes. "I've not seen Tom Canady lollygaggin' around town for a spell. Wonder if he's been up to something?"

"Saw him three days ago," Grandpa said. "Was at the barbershop getting his face steamed and hair cut. Been on a bender."

"When ain't he on one?" Grandma asked. "Louisa, what's this about somebody killed in the cellar?"

"Well," I said, "not really killed. Poncey's the one who got cut and he's alive and Miz Sammy's fixing up his hand. But he came out of the cellar dripping blood. There's blood all over the yard."

"Did Miz Sammy act like something terrible happened, or just like Poncey cut his hand working around?"

"Well—"

"This child is an exaggerator," Mama said. "With her two things equal ten. And if a drop of blood was shed, it'd be all over the yard."

"Maybe yes, maybe no," Grandma said. "Wouldn't hurt a mite for us to stop on our way to the social and say howdy to Miz Sammy. She might like to come along with us."

"Miz Sammy! Go to a social!" This was Mama. "She'll likely be pitchforking hay to the cows in the barn."

"Then we'll just pass the time," Grandma persisted. "If we hurry there'll still be enough light to tell if blood's spattered around."

Then and there I gave up my idea of walking as far as town with them. Maybe Poncey had washed away the blood. Maybe it wasn't his blood beside the cellar door, only browny-red spots of paint.

I hung around the front gate a few minutes after Grandma and Mama disappeared around a corner. Then I called to Grandpa that I was going up the street to play. He waved agreement.

I sauntered off, but once out of sight I ran. I cut back of the old church, had to slant across the edge of the slave graveyard, headed for Miz Sammy's cow lot near Poncey's cabin. The dark would help me hide if the grownups were standing around. And it was getting

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dark, faster than I liked. There was no moon and the stars only proved how dark the night was getting. At the corner of the church I ran blindly ahead. Next thing a murderous pain was in my foot and I was face down in soft spongy earth. I had tripped over a broken-off gravestone.

Fearful even to disturb the shadows, I didn't cry out. I lifted to one knee, hands crawling along the soft sod to gain support. My fingers fumbled over a soft cloth. I hung onto it for something to wipe off my feet and legs. Gone was my idea of eavesdropping back of Miz Sammy's house. I stood and stealthily retraced my steps. Still on the edge of the graveyard, back of the church, my bare feet stubbed on the hard, gritty ground.

As though it had waited for me to get near it, like a mean and clever dog at the end of a chain, a thought sprang at me. This earth I now walked over was hard and gritty, dry from lack of rain. But the sod around the gravestone I had tripped over was soft, loose. Why? WHY? Because that grave must have been dug up *recently*. Why? Nobody got buried there any more. So why would anybody want to dig up a scary old grave with a broken headstone?

Under the hanging street light near our house I brushed my arms and legs with the cloth I had picked up, froze in mid-action. It was Poncey's red bandana. Its blood was dry, didn't rub off on me. But what had Poncey been doing out in the graveyard after dark?

I threw the bandana into a gulley and ran home.

That night, late, it rained. Hard, with thunder and lightning. It puckered up again while we ate breakfast and rained more. I had been planning to tell Grandpa about that fresh-dug-up old grave and get him to go look at it. But with the ground everywhere a loblolly of mud and Mama insisting I was an exaggerator, not even Grandpa would pay attention.

At breakfast Grandpa asked Grandma and Mama, "You women find Miz Sammy last night?" He winked at me.

"The house was dark," Grandma said. "And so was the yard. We couldn't've seen blood splotches if they'd been there. We went around back because Miz Sammy sets in the kitchen most of the time, but if she was there, she never answered."

When the rain stopped I put on my overshoes and walked down to the old church to examine the grave I fell on. It and another smaller grave were straggled out of line with the main graveyard. A bunch of chopped-off weeds were strewed around it. But with the rain water running rivulets between the grave hummocks, every-

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thing muddy, the one I tripped over wasn't much softer than the others. I'd be called an exaggerator again. I should have kept that bloody bandana.

As I came down Miz Sammy's front walk early that evening, past the big scaly-white pillars of the veranda, around to the back door, my heart was beating fast. No red bandana was on the back doorknob. Poncey was even poorer than Miz Sammy. Likely had only one bandana, and I knew where that went.

"Come in, girl, don't let in the flies," Miz Sammy roared.

I went in. Poncey stuck his head from around the inside door to the cellar, said, "I gonna git it right now, Miz Sammy. Howdy, Miss Louizy."

I carried my bucket to the cellar doorway and stared past Poncey, trying to see below.

"All right, Louisa," Miz Sammy said sharply, "come sit right here at the table and wait. Hurry, Poncey."

Poncey vanished, shut the door solidly behind him.

The kitchen clock said ten to six. But for a wonder Miz Sammy paid no attention to the time. Just seemed in an almighty hurry to be done with me.

"Sit!" she repeated. "Now, don't bug those eyes out at me like a whipped pup. I baked some fresh buttermilk cookies, like to try a couple?" I nodded. Miz Sammy took two fat cookies out of a crock and handed them to me. I stared at her, and she stared at me. Then —I swear, it's the truth—she leaned over and lightly kissed my forehead.

"Well," she said, her cheeks real pink, which made her eyes look bluer than ever, "I'd like to know why I did that."

Before I had time to think up an answer, Poncey was back. He handed me my bucket, Miz Sammy took my money. With her other hand she pushed me out the back door. "I'll be right with you, Poncey," she said, and disappeared into the kitchen.

I stood on the steps, rubbing one foot on the other leg, thinking, dazedly, *Miz Sammy must like me, she must like me a lot.* Right after that I thought, *I sure would like to know what's in that cellar, I sure would.*

What pushed me into that second thought was, the outside cellar door wasn't locked. Its padlock lay on the ground beside it. Even a nine-year-old person might lift the door a crack, only a crack, and peek inside. And if that wasn't enough, the cellar was bound to be

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large enough to have hiding places. The door opening into the kitchen was at the middle of the house, the cellar entrance near one end. Even if Miz Sammy and Poncey came down to the cellar I could hunker down behind something.

I slipped around the corner of the house, hid my milk bucket in a shady flower bed. Whipped back, carefully lifted the slanted cellar door. Beneath it were shallow steps, a rough wall beside them blocking my view of the rest of the cellar. I raised the door higher, scooted under it, eased it down, tiptoed down the steps.

I was in a dim, hall-like corridor. Far down it, light from a high, narrow window revealed the corridor to be lined on each side with a series of alcoves. Odds and ends of furniture were stacked in one, boxes and trunks in another, a rake had fallen cattywise across the open side of another.

Where was the slave cell?

I tiptoed farther into the cellar, stopped as I saw a stair step angled into it, took a quick peek into the stair opening, and drew back. Miz Sammy stood at the top of the dim stairway. Poncey, a step down from her, his head blocking any view of me, was saying, "Hit's all right now, Miz Sammy, ever'thing quiet, hit's goan be fine for a spell."

I panicked, slipped across the corridor into an alcove, scrooged behind a ragged, busted-up sofa. Footsteps went up a step, the kitchen door shut.

A mouse skittered over a nearby board. I jumped into the middle of the corridor and was almost to the outside cellar door when I remembered I'd never have a better chance to see that old slave cell.

I tiptoed back. To left and right were the series of alcoves. Coal spilled from one. In another the faint light flickered on glass jars of canned fruit. The alcove with the rake held garden things, scythe, shovel, sacks of fertilizer.

And then I saw it. The alcove from which light filtered from the high, narrow window. This alcove was like the others, three heavy stone walls, no wall beside the corridor. But not open. Instead on that side were heavy iron bars, interrupted by an iron-barred door. The runaway slave cell.

I edged to it and stuck my nose between its first two iron bars. Inside was a cot, no other furnishing. A big man was lying on the cot. On his back, snoring, light from the high window touching his face. It was Old Drunk Tom Canady, Miz Sammy's no-good husband.

I said to myself, you better get out of here.

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I ran back past the alcoves along the dim hallway and pushed against the slanted cellar door. It lifted slightly, then jerked against my thrust. It was now padlocked.

My breath whistled out. What would Miz Sammy, what would my folks do to me? What would I do if Old Tom woke up and saw me?

I took soft, sneaky steps halfway up the kitchen stairway and strained to hear movement. The kitchen was quiet. They had gone outside, found the cellar door unlocked, locked it. But maybe they would stay out awhile, give me time to slip through the kitchen, get outside, head for home.

A crack of light showed beside the door opening. Perhaps its catch was loose. I pushed it with my forefinger. The door swung open a few inches, and I almost jumped out of my skin.

There sat Miz Sammy at the table, her head on her arms, crying, her shoulders jerking. Horrifying, unreal. Like watching the Missouri River flood over its high bluffs to wash out the town. I caught the door's edge with my fingernails and closed it back to a crack.

Back down cellar I skittered to the alcove just short of the slave cell and across the corridor from it. This was beside the stairway, handy for escape. Also handy for Miz Sammy's milk pans, since a clean empty one sat on its broad shelf ready for morning's milk. I climbed up beside it so I could see better if Old Tom woke up. Too, I was hungry for the fading light from his window. I felt the cellar's dark creeping around me, ready to muffle me so not even a scream could be heard.

Whatever else could I do? I hated myself for being so little and stupid, with maybe no chance to grow up and get smart. Should I just stay hidden, wait for Grandpa and Mama to somehow find me? Or tiptoe right past Miz Sammy and take my chances on her skinning me alive?

Suddenly, from desperation, I saw what else I might do. I was small and skinny. The bars fronting the cell were about five inches apart. So were the three iron bars on the slave cell's window. I could slip through the cell's bars, shinny up the window wall, squeeze through the window bars.

But how climb about six feet to the window? The cellar walls were smoothed-off stone, no toeholds on them.

I recalled that board the mouse had scampered over, crept back to that first alcove I had explored, felt around until I found a stack of bed slats. I picked up one and went to the cell.

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Old Drunk Tom still snored. I slipped the slat through the bars, sucked in my stomach, and turned sideways. My bottom snagged on one of the rusty bars and it rattled as I squeezed through. I didn't breathe for a minute, until a raucous snore released me.

The packed dirt floor of the cell was uneven, gouged out here and there. I found a handy rough spot beneath the window, braced the slat into it, put its other end against the window ledge. It formed a nice slanty climb.

On hands and feet, like a highbacked cat, I walked up the board until I touched the window ledge, steadied myself against its rough edge, reached with the other hand, and caught an iron bar. I let loose of the ledge and caught another bar. My full weight fell on them and I began to pull myself up.

Next thing I was sitting astraddle of the plank, two iron bars in my hands, splinters in my legs, and dried out, rotten concrete sprinkled over me.

A heavy movement came from the cot. I looked over my shoulder. Old Drunk Tom was sitting up, his figure shadowy and menacing. "Hey!" he said. He gargled and hawked in his throat. "Fetch me one a my bottles, young'un. Old Tom's dry."

Better Miz Sammy than him.

I jumped off the board and headed for the cell bars. Next thing I was muffled against Old Drunk Tom's chest, his sour filthy breath floating around my head. "Say, maybe you come here to steal my whiskey, huh? What you doin' in my house? No young'uns round here, you been stealin' I'm gonna thrash your—"

I screamed. A miserable nightmare scream, barely peeping out of my mouth. Old Tom grabbed my ear and twisted. "Shut up! Scream agin 'n I'll stuff it down your throat, cram it through your belly!" He took one arm from around me, grabbed my shoulder, and shook me like I was a puppy, then slung me on his cot.

"Whose young'un are you?" His voice was thick, like his tongue took up too much room.

I couldn't speak. "Whose young'un!"

"Myra Newport's," I whispered.

"Old Josh Clark's widowed girl Myra?"

The mention of my grandfather brought courage. "He's my grandpa. You better leave me be. My grandpa keeps a shotgun under his bed. Loaded. He'll shoot you!"

One hand snatched me up. With the other hand he fumbled under the thin mattress. I saw the flash of a knife. "Sass me, I'll cut out

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your tongue. Lyin' too, why would Josh Clark's girl be in my cellar? You're some gypsy girl sneaked in here to steal."

"Is too my gran'pa, my gran'pa, my gran'pa!" I babbled.

He hesitated. Straightened, swayed like a high wind had struck him. Steadied and shook me again, then slung me back. My head struck the wall. "Your ole gran'pap come after me, I'll cut him worse'n I cut Ponce! I got a belly full a being trounced around, locked up like some kinda animal. Looked down on like I ain't no man, jist some kinda animal. I'm gonna slice my way outa this damn jail!" He began to yell, "Samantha! Samantha! Git here afore I kill this sneakin' young'un!"

A door above us banged against a wall. Steps pounded down the cellar stairs. And there Miz Sammy stood on the other side of the bars, holding a lamp high beside her face. "Louisa!" Her voice sounded like it was squeezed out.

Old Drunk Tom yanked me off the cot, pinioned my arms in front of him, put the tip of his knife against my throat. It pricked the skin. Stung.

"Tom, I'll let you out," Miz Sammy said quietly. "The key's in the kitchen, I'll get it. Set the child free."

Tom laughed. No fun in it. Deep, rough, like frogs inside him were trying to jump out. "No you ain't, you ain't gonna fool me no more. Onct this young'un's free, you'll take your time letting me out. You'll send Ponce for the constable, rouse up Josh Clark. Then I'll be nabbed onct I set foot outside. Neither you'll tell me where you had Ponce hide away my whiskey he stole, I won't git my whiskey. First you go bring me my whiskey, then mebbe I'll let go this young'un—"

"I'll get it," said Miz Sammy, turning toward the stairs. "There's a bottle in the pantry."

"Hold it!" he yelled. He laughed mean again, the frogs chunking up and down in his throat. The knife tip pressed at my skin. "Smart, ain't you? Allus been too smart, you and all them Blairs. But Tom's smarter. Thought you got all my whiskey outa that grave Ponce caught me scrabblin' in. Run off when I knifed him, but he come back later, dug up my bottles. Well, I got another hid back of you, over in them garden things. Got a bottle bedded down in a sack of fertilizer. Two more in that tub of shucked corn. You go git 'em, all three, or I'll slit this young'un's throat. Won't be my doin', it'll be yourn."

"Don't be a fool," Miz Sammy said coolly. "You do that, you'll end up not even drinking water. It's hard to swallow hanging from a rope."

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"Woman, I got nowheres to go down, I already hit bottom. You reach me that whiskey or you'll have a murder in your hoity-toity damn house."

I felt squeezed into nothing as I saw Miz Sammy's broad shoulders droop like she just gave up. "Tom," she said. "Oh, Tom. What have we come to?"

This time his laugh lost its frog sound, sounded like a squawky trumpet. "Well, well. So I fin'ly got to show you who's boss."

"I reckon so," she said. "I'll go upstairs now and get the cell key. Then you bring out Louisa and get the whiskey yourself."

"No'm," said Old Tom, like licking on a stick of candy. "You'll not leave this cellar. You'll hand me them bottles. You'll poke 'em through these bars. This time I'm gonna drink in peace. I'm sick of drinkin' in jerks, scratching up a bottle at a time. Damn that Ponce anyway, spying, finding my grave hideout. Shoulda cut him for keeps."

"All right," Miz Sammy agreed. "But let Louisa go first. Louisa, how did you get in there?"

"I sc-scooted."

"Then scoot out. I'll fetch your bottles, Tom. When you have them, let the child go."

"Woman, I ain't crazy. This young'un's settin' right here 'til I drink my fill. Goin' no place, neither you. You kin set 'n watch."

"You're a fool! Josh Clark'll come looking for her. Any minute. She's expected home right after getting the milk."

"He comes messin' around 'n you call him in, me and this young'un'll both be outa here, her to Glory and me to hell," Tom said, mean. He flicked the knife's tip light and quick across my throat. It burned my skin in a fiery line.

Miz Sammy put the lamp nearer the bars, stared at me, her mouth tight in her white face. She turned, went swiftly toward the garden alcove just on the other side of the slave cell. There came the clatter of a spade or a hoe. She was out of our line of sight but now and again her shadow flickered on the corridor ceiling. I swiped at my neck, saw blood on my fingers. I was too scared to cry. I wondered if I could run fast enough, squeeze through the bars before Old Tom grabbed me. Knew I couldn't. Two of his big steps and he'd have me before I reached the bars.

In the alcove next door bottles clicked against each other. I thought I heard a splash, but wasn't sure: *Dear God, don't let Miz Sammy spill it all, he'll cut me sure if she does.*

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"Git a move on!" Old Tom yelled.

And there came Miz Sammy against the bars, a bottle in her hand. She held it through the bars. "Where's t'other'n?" he demanded.

"Can't carry but one at a time with a lamp in my hand. And you can't drink but one at a time. Louisa's still with you, you've got what you asked for."

His laugh was almost a giggle. "Outsmarted by your ole man, huh? All that damn honor you brag your feisty folks left you with don't count for much tonight, does it? Set that bottle on the floor. Inside." She did. "Young'un, pick it up." I did.

Old Tom held the bottle in one hand, me with the other. "Uncork it," he ordered, then sniggered. "Maybe I oughta give her the first nip, Samantha, so she'll be more friendly." Miz Sammy drew a sharp breath, her face spooky in the lamplight. Nothing about her looked alive except her eyes.

I struggled with the cork, my fingers like rubber bands. Old Tom swore, shoved me toward the back of the cell. "Git in that corner and stay put. You run, I'll stick you."

He stood in the center of the cell. Uncorked the bottle, tipped it, took a long swallow. "Hell of a taste, musta turned on me. Been hid too long." He grinned, said, "But a second swaller always kills the first." He drank again.

He spat. Strangled, coughed. Dropped the knife, grabbed his throat. Staggered to the cot and fell on it.

"Louisa! Scat out of there!" Miz Sammy's voice was like a whip-crack.

Tom groaned. "What's in this, what'd you gimme?" He croaked, gagged. The cell smelled awful, with sweat and sour stomach. I slipped through the bars.

"Run for Doctor Masters up the street! Hurry!" Miz Sammy ordered. "Tell Poncey come help me! Tell him Tom's poisoned, we got to pour salt water down him." She looked savage, as though she hated me. "Scat, you little meddling fool! He's dying!"

He did die. That night. Miz Sammy had put a dose of bug poison in his whiskey, figuring to give him just enough to get me free. She and Poncey washed him out quick as they could, and the doctor ran down with his stomach pump. Doctor Masters testified to the police that the dose was mild, ought only to have made him sick enough to let me free, he had such fast treatment. But according to the

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autopsy, Old Tom's stomach, already half eaten up with whiskey, had been in no shape for bug poison.

There was never any question about Miz Sammy being exonerated. It was barely considered even any kind of manslaughter, what with everybody in town trying to shake her hand for saving a child. As for the child, well, you better believe that's the last milk I was ever sent for. Only ones happy about that were me and the old gander.

Miz Sammy on her part wouldn't shake hands with anybody. Kept swearing she was guilty of murder, tried to get her lawyer to set up a trial. Said it wasn't honorable for her to go free, asked if it had been Old Tom poisoning her instead of the way it was, would he have gone free?

Weeks later, Poncey found Miz Sammy down in the slave cell. Dead. Lying on Old Tom's cot, a broken glass on the floor beside it. Bug poison again. This time a strong dose and nobody to rinse her out.

A sealed envelope addressed to Poncey was beside her. It read, "This is for Poncey Jones from Samantha Blair." Poncey was afraid to open it. He got Doctor Masters to do it. Inside was a heavy gold ring with a big diamond in it. A carat or more. Her daddy's ring.

That was all the Blair jewels ever found.

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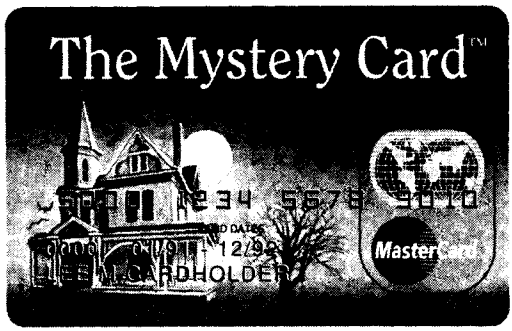

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Piper said, "Cuts your throat. Well, there's two ways to approach that particular little problem. First of all, I could drive you straight to the airport and buy you a coach ticket to Canada."

With a snort, Iris said: "How about a coach ticket to Hong Kong?"

How about the moon? If he's after you, he'll find you, no matter where you hide. . . ."

SISTERS

by CHARLES LARSON

They brought her into Willamette Memorial on the night of the nineteenth, siren whooping, and nobody in the ambulance or in the emergency room would have bet five cents that she'd make it to the twentieth.

She was a tall, bloodied-up ash-blonde, naked except for a caked blue pullover. She was too long for the gurney, and they kept banging her bare feet against the green walls whenever they shifted her. Before she fainted, she promised them that if they did that one more time she'd sever their somethings and stick them up their somethings.

"I sure get the drift," one of the nurses said, "but what's the language?"

"I think it's Finnish," said the resident. "I go to this sauna. Can somebody cut her sweater off? Just rip it up the back."

"Wow," the nurse murmured, "what did she hit, a windshield?"

"She told us some guy knifed her," said the ambulance attendant.

"Told you in Finnish?"

"No, English."

"Did you get a name?" the resident asked.

"Iris Jean Salonen, Astoria. Single. Twenty-three."

"Could she tell you anything else?"

"Not a heck of a lot, no," said the ambulance attendant. "She hitched a ride—"

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"Good grief!" said the nurse. "In the dead of night? In this town?"

"Well, these kids today don't know what fear is," the attendant said. "Anyway, she didn't see what was wrong until she jumped in the car."

"What was wrong?"

"The driver was wearing a ski mask."

"Oh-oh," said the nurse.

Slowly the resident looked up from the minced belly and repeated: "Ski mask?"

"That's him again, isn't it?" said the nurse.

"You know the guy?" asked the attendant.

"The last rape victim we had in here mentioned a ski mask," the resident replied. "Where'd you pick this woman up?"

"Powell and Echo Road."

"Same area . . ."

"Same kind of a knife job?"

"Almost the same."

"What's different?"

"He wasn't as thorough. If ICU can keep this one alive until tomorrow, I think she might have a chance."

"To make it?"

"To finger him," the resident said.

They wouldn't let her sleep. They woke her up to ask her to try to vomit into the pan next time. They made her puff furiously into a fat glass tube. Out of the clear blue sky someone wanted to know if she felt better after the last transfusion and from then on all she could think about was AIDS. She said that if she tested HIV-positive later she'd sue this sinkhole for every dollar it had.

There were no windows in the ICU—nothing but blipping TV screens and tubes and brisk ghostly RNs hovering around—so she couldn't distinguish day from night. Once she questioned a young black doctor as to how long she'd been there, and he said a little over thirty-six hours. He sounded surprised. He asked her if there was anything he could do for her, and she said there certainly was. She said that she normally slept on her stomach and she was going crazy stuck on her back like a spider in this web of wires. She'd appreciate it if he could loosen her a little.

"Well," answered a woman's voice, "I don't believe they want to do that just yet. They still need to monitor you."

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Iris thought about things for a minute and then she cracked her eyelids open and squinted down toward the foot of the bed, where a stocky brunette in jeans and a windbreaker was sitting with an open notebook propped on one crossed calf. No makeup. Thirty, thirty-five years old. Straight shoulder-length hair parted in the middle.

"I'll tell 'em, though," the woman said.

"And just who the hell might you be?" Iris asked.

The woman fished a badge out of her pocket and held it out for Iris to read. Portland Police. "Detective Arlene Piper," the woman said. "Pleasure to meet you."

"Well, where's the black guy I was talking to?"

"No black guy here."

After a moment, Iris said: "Would you have any idea how long I've been trapped in this bed?"

"They told me this was your fourth day."

Iris sighed.

"Okay," said Detective Piper, "couple of basic questions—"

"Beat it."

"How good a look did you get at your assailant?"

"Never saw him."

"What kind of car was he driving?"

"I don't remember."

Stolidly Detective Piper flipped back a couple of notebook pages. "The ambulance attendant stated you told him you were hitchhiking on southeast Powell. A car stopped and you got in. The driver was wearing a ski mask. Do you remember any of that?"

"No."

"Uh-huh." Detective Piper closed the notebook. "Miss Salonen, you were criminally assaulted. Your assailant may be the same guy who's been hitting on women around here for the past three years. He's stabbed four of them to death that we know about. You're the only one to get away. Don't you want to help us find him?"

"No."

"Miss Salonen—"

"Honey," Iris said, "I'll explain it to you once and then you can run along. I'm not a kid. I've been on my own since my dad ditched me when I was sixteen. I've worked the canneries, I was a manicurist, I tended bar. I know where it's all at. I haven't got an apartment because my landlady locked me out on the fifteenth for non-payment. All the clothes I owned I was wearing when our boy picked

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me up. God knows where they are now. The only thing I have left is my life and I plan to keep it."

"Did he threaten to kill you if you—"

"I don't remember."

"Okay." Detective Piper clapped the notebook shut and stood up. Small-boned. Large-bosomed. "I hear you. You get some sleep now. I'll be back tomorrow."

"Honey, what'd you say your name was?"

"Arlene Piper."

"Arlene, you haven't heard a thing. You're barking up the wrong tree. You go on back to the office and tell your boss that the lady won't cooperate and maybe he'll put you on an easier case."

"Wouldn't care for that," Arlene said.

"Why not?"

"I have to stop the guy before he kills his next pickup."

"Why? As long as you're not the pickup?"

Arlene cocked a surprised eyebrow. "We're sisters," she said.

On the twenty-fifth, they pulled her various plugs, packed up her colorful medications and her, and moved them all to a ward on the third floor overlooking a parking lot. They asked her to sit on the edge of the bed and dangle, and she agreed to do that, but she shied away from using the walker. She claimed it made her dizzy. They didn't exactly accuse her of malingering, but they sent over a man with a goatee to point out that she had no insurance and that they weren't operating a charity here. She said she realized that. She promised she'd split the minute her dizziness passed even if she collapsed afterward from a mis-diagnosed brain contusion. Angrily the goateed man warned her not to try to threaten him, and she said oh, she knew better than that; she'd die first.

So it was a standoff. They left the walker, but they no longer coaxed her to try it.

Next day she was watching "The Young and the Restless" and pondering her limited options when the door swished open and who should come striding in but Detective Piper. Same windbreaker. Same jeans. But carrying a manila envelope and a couple of heavy shopping bags this time. "Hi, man," said Detective Piper. "You look better. You're getting your color back."

"I thought I told you to butt out," Iris said.

"Well, sure," Piper said, "but you could always have had a change of heart." She plopped the manila envelope onto the bedside cabinet

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and hoisted the two shopping bags up beside Iris. "Here."

Iris eyed the bags suspiciously. "What's this?"

"I bought you some clothes."

"You're kidding me."

"They were practically free. I got 'em at Goodwill. You can pay me back later. At least you won't have to leave mother-naked. I'll put 'em in the closet, okay?"

Iris looked up. "Just whose bright idea was this anyway?"

From the shallow closet Piper called: "Whose what? How do you mean?"

"I mean," Iris answered, "here's your clothes, what's your hurry. I mean if I sniff real hard I think I can smell a little fat guy with a goatee hiding in the woodpile."

Piper shut the closet door and peered at Iris, fists on her hips. "What did I miss? You've lost me."

"You tell Mr. Whiskers thanks but no thanks. I'll leave here when I'm good and ready. Which won't be until I can decide how to clear out of this town before somebody cuts my throat."

Piper said, "Ah," and nodded. "Cuts your throat. Well, there's two ways to approach that particular little problem. First of all, I could drive you straight to the airport and buy you a coach ticket to Canada."

With a snort, Iris said: "How about a coach ticket to Hong Kong?"

"How about the moon? If he's after you, he'll find you, no matter where you hide."

"I couldn't agree more. So what's second of all?"

"Second of all, you describe him to me and we pick him up and put him away for twenty years."

"Or he fakes an alibi and he wriggles off the hook and there I sit with my bare throat hanging out."

"He can't fake alibis for all the murders we'll charge him with."

Iris smiled a little and shook her head.

"Okay," Piper said decisively. "Let's start with the car again." She wet a finger and flicked to a new page in her notebook. "Describe the car."

Narrowing her eyes, Iris said: "You know, you kind of remind me of somebody. Who is it? Some singer."

"Roseanne Barr," Piper said.

"Come on, get serious," Iris said. She snapped her fingers. "Wait a minute. You know who you look like? Sort of a squat Buffy St. Marie."

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"It's the cheekbones," Piper said. "Same blood, different tribes."

Surprised, Iris said: "You're an Indian?"

"Quarter Winnebago."

"They named you guys after the motor home?"

Piper didn't reply.

Presently Iris said: "Was that racist?"

"It's just familiar. I've heard it a thousand times."

"I didn't mean it to be racist, Arlene," Iris muttered. "I'm a Finn. I grew up in Astoria. I bear my own scars."

"Yeah, I know."

"I apologize," Iris said.

"Apology accepted." Piper stuck the notebook in her pocket and started for the door. "Well—"

"Arlene—for all the good it'll do you, it was a subcompact."

Piper whirled and snapped, "Toyota? Honda?"

Blinking, Iris said, "My God, I wouldn't know one from the other."

"How about a license number?"

"Hey, don't get pushy," Iris said. "I didn't see it, Arlene, swear on my mother's grave."

"Okay," Piper said. "Once you were in the car, where'd he take you?"

Puffing out her cheeks, Iris said, "I must be nuts. Echo Road."

"Then what?"

"He just—we got out—"

"Yeah. . . ?"

"He told me to stand in the headlights—"

"Ah," Arlene interrupted. "Ah. Ah. Okay. Now look at the headlights."

"What?"

"Squint. Look down. On the bumper between the lights. There's the license plate. What's it say?"

"No, I don't want to do this anymore," Iris said. She twisted onto her side, away from Piper, and started to cry.

At last Piper bent over the bed and rested her hand on Iris's shoulder. Didn't pat it. Didn't squeeze. Just let it rest there as lightly and as warm as a sunshine ray. Then she straightened and moved toward the door.

In a muffled voice, Iris said, "Oh, for Pete's sake."

Piper waited.

"It was an Oregon plate. The first letter was D. D something H. One of the numbers was a four."

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The door sighed shut.

Every itching scar on Iris's body throbbed. She never had felt worse. She couldn't stop crying.

The phone call came the following morning while she was trying to gag her lousy breakfast down. A mustachioed nurse who hated her guts and never let her forget it marched in with the communal phone, plugged it into the jack behind her bed, and shoved the receiver at her chest. "Portland police," she said. "Some detective."

Iris wiped her fingers on the sheet and said, "Hello?" into the phone.

"Hi, man, it's me," Piper said.

"Yeah, hi," Iris said.

"Well, I finally got DMV off their butts and they came up with sixteen possibles. We're zeroing in on him."

"We are, are we?"

"Aren't you excited?"

"Thrilled to death."

"Our best bet is to vacuum the interiors for fibers off your sweater. Once we've fingered the car, we've fingered the man. There's just one little hitch."

"Why am I not surprised to hear that?"

"I can't get permission to vacuum all sixteen cars. They asked me to narrow it down first. So I need to pick your brain again."

"Forget it, Arlene."

"What were the seats made of? Vinyl? Cloth?"

"It's no use."

"Try."

"I have tried." Iris touched the manila envelope on her bedside table. "You left your pictures here."

"My—?"

"It was deliberate, wasn't it? You figured I'd open the envelope."

Piper said: "Iris—"

"It was a cheap shot. Nobody ought to have to look at pictures like that."

"Nobody ought to have to go through what those four women did. The question is, did the cheap shot work? Are you any more willing to help put him away now?"

Slowly, Iris lowered the phone toward its cradle.

"Iris?" buzzed the little voice in the receiver, miles away.

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Her hand ached with the need to hang up. She rubbed her thumb across the receiver, back and forth, back and forth.

"Iris?"

Finally she returned the phone to her mouth. "Suppose," she said, "I do flip out and go along with this. Suppose we identify the guy. Will you swear to me you'll ice him before he has a chance to hurt me?"

"I swear," Piper said.

"Baloney," Iris said.

"I'm telling you we'll—"

"Baloney, I know how justice works. You'll book him and five minutes later he'll be out on bail and I'll be lunch."

"No bail on a capital charge."

"Or some jury'll let him off because he had an unhappy childhood."

"Nobody'll let him off if you provide a positive identification, no way."

"Arlene, there's just no point to this. I can't remember anything else."

"Describe the interior of the car to me."

"It was a car, a car! What do you want me to say?"

"Anything hanging in the back window?"

"Huh? No."

"From the rearview mirror?"

"No."

"From the sun visor."

"No."

"Don't just say no. Think about it."

"I don't have to think. I remember the sun visor."

"Why?"

Her free hand had begun to tremble. She slipped it under the sheet and sat on it. But it continued to tremble. "Well—when I got in the car and saw the ski mask, and felt the knife at my waist, I said: 'Swell, wouldn't you know,' and he said: 'You look like something the cat dragged in, fix your mouth.' He said there was a mirror on the back of my visor. So I pulled the visor down and dropped the goddam lipstick on the floor and apologized like a maniac and ended up with more red on my nose and my cheeks than my mouth, and there was nothing hanging from the visor."

"Then you heard his voice! High voice? Low?"

"Just a voice."

"But you'd recognize it if you heard it again?"

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"Well—maybe."

"What else do you recall about him? Was he wearing gloves?"

"No."

"Any marks on him? Tattoos?"

"No. . . ."

Excited, Piper said: "But what?"

"But nothing."

"Come on, your voice changed. You remembered something."

Both hands were trembling now. "Well—I don't see how it can help you much—"

"Say it."

She wet her dry lips. "He was left-handed."

Taken aback, Piper said, "How do you know?"

"Will it help?"

"Well, of course! But you can't guess. You have to be positive."

"I'm positive."

"Then what did he do that was left-handed? The knife isn't enough, he could have been holding it that way to get a grip on you. What else?"

"Nothing."

"Iris, listen to me—"

"If one of your sixteen possibles is left-handed," Iris said, "haul him in." She let her head fall against the back of the bed and pressed harder on her shaky hand. "I'll identify him," she said.

That night Piper called back to report briskly that there was one left-hander among the possibles, an out-of-work lumberjack named Ed Tollefson. Tollefson claimed he had a solid alibi for the night of the assault—he'd been in a bar with three pals—but Piper told Iris not to fret about that, they always had alibis. The police already had impounded Tollefson's 1983 grey Colt and Piper would send a technician over within the hour to record Iris's fingerprints for possible match-ups inside the car. They'd get to work with the vacuum first thing in the morning.

"He's dead meat, man." Piper said. "I can smell it. How do you feel?"

"Sick," Iris said. "When do I have to see him?"

"When will you be decent tomorrow?"

"Six, six-thirty."

"We'll be there," Piper said.

* * *

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He was far smaller than she'd expected—five-seven at most (six-six in her nightmares)—and frail for a lumberjack. Balding, bemused, trying to remain polite and cooperative. Nevertheless, this was the man; she knew it the minute he stepped into the room; she knew it by his fingers; she knew it by the nausea at the base of her throat. His lawyer was a businesslike lady in her twenties, not long out of college. Piper huddled over the two of them like a mother duck, fetching them chairs, asking Tollefson again and again if he was comfortable, wheedling conversation out of him and lifting her thick eyebrows questioningly at Iris.

"He's talking huskier than he did then," Iris whispered. "But it's him."

"All right, this is outrageous, that's it," said the lawyer.

Unhappily, Tollefson said, "Now, Tiffany, she's had a hard time—"

"You keep out of it," Tiffany said. Her eyes burned into Iris's. "Miss Salonen, let me tell you why we're here. We're here to nip this grotesque situation in the bud. You've never laid eyes on my client and you know it. He knows it. Any jury would know it. He's got an absolutely ironclad alibi. And yet here you come pulling some kind of left-handed foolishness out of thin air—"

"It isn't foolishness," Iris whispered.

"Oh, isn't it?" snapped Tiffany. "What did he do, sign his name for you?"

"Look at his left hand," Iris said.

It startled them all. Tollefson checked his hand, turned it back and forth for Tiffany's inspection.

Tiffany looked up, puzzled. "So he bites his nails."

"They aren't bitten," Iris said. "They're cut ragged. I was a manicurist. I used to see it all the time. The nails on his right hand are okay because he cut them with the hand he uses best, the left. He can't be that smooth with his right, so the left nails look funny."

Staring, Tiffany gave an explosive laugh. "And that's it?" she said. "That's your case?"

"That's how I recognized him."

"For the love of Mike," Tiffany said. She slumped back in her chair and goggled at Piper. "Okay," she said. "Charge him. And see how fast I clap a false-arrest suit on this city."

"Nobody," Piper said slowly, "is charging anybody with anything."

Iris jerked her head around, eyes wide.

"At least," Piper continued, "not yet."

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Tiffany sighed and slapped her thighs and stood up. "Off we go, Ed."

"Oh, Mr. Tollefson," said Piper, "not that I want to tell you your business, but I think you'd be well-advised to stick around for a couple of minutes longer." She lifted the phone and began dialing.

"For what?" Tiffany asked.

Piper winked at her and held up one finger for silence. Into the phone she said: "Hi, is Charlie Lee around there? Yeah, put him on." She whistled tonelessly. Then: "Charlie—Arlene. How we coming?" She chewed on her lower lip, listening. "Right, well, how about the sun visor on the passenger side, the back of it?" She rubbed the nape of her neck. "Fibers?" she asked. She glanced at Tollefson, who had retaken his seat and was picking pensively at the ragged fingernails on his left hand. "Charlie," Piper said, "will you hang on a second?" She covered the receiver. Iris reached out to touch her mutely on the elbow, but Piper wouldn't look around. "Mr. Tollefson?" she said.

"Yes, ma'am," Tollefson said.

"When did you wash your car last?"

"Detective Piper," Tiffany said wearily, "Mr. Tollefson has absolutely busted his behind trying to cooperate with you people, but, really, enough's enough, so why don't we—"

"Well, let's see," Tollefson said, and suddenly, Iris realized, the eyes were the eyes behind the ski mask, merry as an elf's, in love with the game and the risk, sparkling in the expressionless face. "I—believe it was day before yesterday."

"Ed," Tiffany began.

"Day before yesterday," Piper repeated. "Just about the time the police first contacted you."

"Was it?" Tollefson said. "Why, yes, I believe it was."

"How did you happen to wash your car at that particular time, Mr. Tollefson?"

"Force of habit. I wash it every Saturday."

"Cleaned the interior pretty good, too, didn't you," Piper said. "There isn't hardly a spot of dust in it. Not a fingerprint. Not even yours."

"I do my best," Tollefson said.

Tiffany pivoted abruptly. "Ed, come on."

Sympathetically Tollefson smiled at Iris. But the merry eyes hadn't had quite their fill of fun. "Real joy to have met you, Miss Salonen," he said. "Maybe we can do it again real soon."

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"Ed," Tiffany warned.

Still smiling, Tollefson walked toward Tiffany.

But before he could reach her, Piper said suddenly: "Wait a minute. Hold it."

Tollefson glanced around.

Piper stared at him for a second and then whipped her head toward Iris. "Didn't you tell me you dropped your lipstick?"

Confused, Iris said: "When?"

"In the car. When he ordered you to fix your mouth."

"Oh. Yeah. . . "

"Now when you picked it up—"

"I didn't pick it up. Not right away. I couldn't find it. It rolled under the seat."

"Good," Piper said. "Good. Good. You felt around for it—"

"Yeah—"

"'Patted the floor under the seat—"

"Yeah—"

Piper stared at her and then barked, "Charlie," into the phone. "What kind of floor covering does the Colt have? Rubber? Plastic? Fair enough. Check the covering under the seat. For prints. No, way under the seat, way back. I'll wait." In the hallway a P.A. voice called for Dr. Kosterlitz, stat. Minutes ticked by. At last Piper raised the phone to her mouth again. "Yeah. Fine, Charlie, thanks. Thank you."

Iris whispered: "Don't do this to me, Arlene. What'd he say?"

"Ed, will you come on?" Tiffany asked.

"No, let her tell all of us," Tollefson cut in. "Well? What'd he say, ma'am?"

Piper lowered the phone to its cradle as gently as an eggshell onto a feather-bed. "Oh, not much, sir," she replied. "One little word. 'Bingo.' "

Tiffany drew Tollefson out of the room by his elbow.

Chuckling, Piper said: "Hey, Iris, hey, hey, not to worry, I'll pick him up in the parking lot. And quit crying."

"I can't," Iris said. "Some crazy pair we make."

"The dirty blonde and the wooden Indian."

"Snow White and Rose Red."

"Sisters," Piper said, and grinned from ear to ear.

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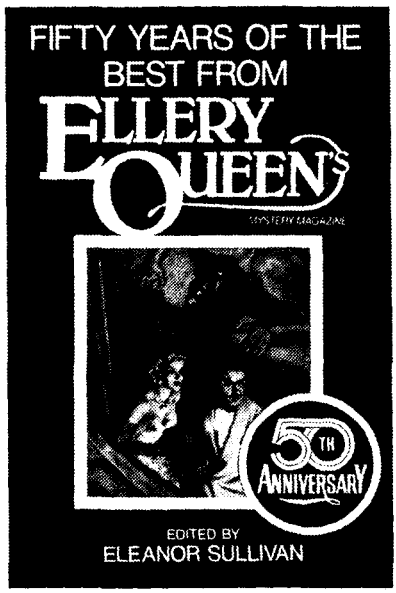

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a *NEW* short story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Our most frequent contributor makes a departure this month from his several popular series to tell a tale of honor and loyalty in the French Foreign Legion. . . .

THE EIGHT FRENCH DANCERS

by EDWARD D. HOCH

All this happened a long time ago, back in 1974. It was the summer of Nixon's resignation, and while my colleagues were back in Washington waiting for that momentous event, I had taken myself off to Paris to write a book. America's involvement in Vietnam was just about over, having proven unsatisfactory and downright tragic to all sides. It seemed we needed a book tracing the whole course of that terrible war starting with the French involvement in 1946.

I arrived in Paris bearing a letter of introduction to Marcel Thorndu, a retired general in the French Foreign Legion who had seen service in Vietnam and Algeria. My hope was that he could direct me to others like himself who might fill me in on the conflict from a French point of view.

Thorndu was in his mid-seventies, a vigorous white-haired man who still possessed the slim body of a man half his age. He met me in the smoking room of his club, an exclusive one for retired officers.

"Mr. Paul Carmody? A pleasure to see you. I read your Washington dispatches in the European *Herald-Tribune*. What can I do for you?"

"I'm here to do a book, sir. I thought you might be able to help me."

"About the Legion?" He spoke with little trace of a French accent.

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"About Vietnam."

He grunted and pressed a bell on the table, summoning a waiter. "What would you like to drink?"

"A Scotch and water would be fine."

"The usual for me," he told the waiter, who reappeared shortly with the Scotch and a glass of white wine. Thorndu focused on me with his deep grey eyes and said, "I was their general at Dien Bien Phu."

"I know, sir. That's why I came to you first. I understand there's to be a reunion of the Legion officers this month."

"Next week, in the south of France. No one in his right mind would come to Paris in August."

"If it would be possible for me to attend the reunion, to talk with some of the men who served there—"

The white-haired man shrugged. "It is a private affair."

"There must be one session I could attend."

He thought about that. "Only the concluding dinner, when wives and family members are in attendance. My granddaughter will be accompanying me. She has a villa there for the month of August."

"Perhaps then—"

"Perhaps. I will see how the others feel. You must understand there are many nationalities involved. The French Foreign Legion, true to its tradition, admits people of all nationalities. Many have been outcasts. We never question a man's past, and if our troops are called mercenaries by some, then so be it. During World War II we suffered for a time because many of our recruits have always been Germans, but by the time we went to Indochina, the Germans were coming back and we had a new war to fight."

"That's the war I want to learn about," I told him.

The following week I took the train to Nice. General Thorndu had arranged for his granddaughter to pick me up at the station. The idea of a granddaughter had conjured in my mind the image of a girl in her late teens with a pigtail hanging halfway down her back as she maneuvered the family car through the crowded streets. I was not prepared for Greta Weist.

She was probably thirty years old, carefully dressed in a white linen suit that looked expensive. Her blonde hair set off a pleasantly tanned face that suggested her summer by the sea had been spent mainly outdoors. "Greta Weist," she greeted me, giving a firm, businesslike handshake. "I'm the general's granddaughter."

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"Pleased to meet you. Somehow I didn't expect an English accent down here."

She smiled absently. "My home is in London. My father was British. I come here every August." She motioned toward a little yellow sedan. "This is my car, Mr. Carmody."

I got in, sliding my bag into the back seat. She drove well, keeping the conversation on topics like the weather. "Doesn't it ever rain here?" I asked.

"Of course, but very little in July and August. That's why the area is so popular." She turned onto a side road, bounced over a pothole and immediately apologized. "I must think I'm still in England."

"What do you do back there?"

"I'm in the theater."

"Oh?"

She laughed for the first time. "When I say that it always gives people visions of my playing Nora or Desdemona. Actually I'm a set designer."

"That still sounds glamorous to a Washington columnist like myself."

"Here we are," she said suddenly, bounding into a gravel driveway that had suddenly appeared to our left. I could see a large house ahead through the trees.

"Is this where you're staying?"

"The general rented it for the month, actually. He wants to entertain a few of the Legion men who were his special friends. I was staying here alone until he came down a few days ago."

"He's been a great help to me, trying to arrange it so I can attend the reunion dinner."

"Well—" She hesitated. "He may not have been too successful in that. But I should let him tell it."

I didn't have to wait long to hear the bad news from General Thorndu's own lips. He came downstairs wearing a short dressing gown over dark trousers, an unlit cigar in one hand. "Hello, Carmody. Sorry you had to make the long trip from Paris for nothing. I tried to reach you at your hotel, but you'd already left."

"What's the trouble?" I asked with a sinking feeling.

Thorndu poured himself a glass of white wine before replying. Greta and I declined anything for ourselves. "One of our men, Colonel Zimmerman, is opposed to having a journalist present at our formal dinner," he explained. "I cannot go against his wishes."

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"I'm sorry to hear that," I said, making no effort to hide my disappointment.

It was Greta who came to my rescue with a suggestion. "Couldn't Mr. Carmody attend your informal luncheon here tomorrow? It will be a much smaller group, of course, but he might be able to arrange a few private interviews for later."

The old general considered her suggestion. "But I've invited Zimmerman, and he's the one who objected!"

"He was always a troublemaker. Certainly you're allowed to invite whomever you wish to your villa."

Thorndu snapped his fingers. "How about this? You arrive after lunch and join us for drinks. It will be a small affair—a half-dozen of those officers who served under me. If that would satisfy you, I'm pleased to extend an invitation. And if Zimmerman objects he can simply leave."

"It sounds agreeable to me," I replied, knowing I had no other choice.

"Very good! Come by tomorrow around two. We should be finished eating by then, and I will have prepared them for your arrival."

Greta accompanied me out to the car. "I think it will work out all right. Some of them will talk with you."

"Thanks for your help."

She was more relaxed than when she'd first met me. Perhaps I seemed less of a threat now. "A pleasure," she replied.

She dropped me at a hotel she recommended and promised to come for me the following afternoon.

I spent the next morning exploring the byways of Nice. This was the heart of the French Riviera, crowded with cars in the heart of the vacation season. American tourists were familiar figures here, not welcomed but tolerated more than the Italians. The people of Nice still remembered that Mussolini's troops had occupied the city briefly during World War II.

Greta Weist was parked in front of the hotel at one forty-five, as she'd promised. "Hello," I greeted her, sliding into the front seat. "How's the luncheon going?"

"Grandfather is pleased. Frankly, I've never cared for those Legion people. They're brutal men, most of them, and even in retirement they can be chauvinistic in the extreme."

"Zimmerman?"

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She sped around a curve and headed out of the city's center. "Oh, I'm used to Zimmerman. There's another named Balcan who's a bit of a nuisance, though. He doesn't seem to realize I'm young enough to be his daughter."

"He makes advances?"

"He's been known to. And then there's Renyon and Koats. They don't advance on anyone but each other."

I chuckled. "Those long desert nights can be lonely."

"The French Foreign Legion! Many people don't even realize they're still in existence. They almost were disbanded on a couple of occasions, but somehow they've survived."

"They've served France well over many decades. Whatever their individual weaknesses, they were brave men for the most part."

Presently the villa loomed ahead of us and I observed the cars parked in front. Greta Weist pulled around the back to her personal parking space. "I'm sorry you had to miss lunch by picking me up. I could have taken a taxi out here."

"Nonsense! I was happy for an excuse to get away from all their war stories."

We entered the villa and found General Thorndu and his comrades still at the table. A maid was collecting the last of their dessert dishes. "We're finished here," General Thorndu announced. "You arrived just in time, Greta. Gentlemen, this is the American journalist about whom I told you. Paul Carmody. He's writing a book about Vietnam."

"I'm pleased to be here," I responded, looking around the table at the general and his six guests. They were aging military men for the most part, though one or two of them could have been still in their forties. I had expected them to wear their old uniforms, but they were dressed instead in dark suits with white shirts and identical Legion ties with red, white, and blue stripes and small gold wreaths. An eighth chair, empty now, indicated where Greta had been seated.

The men stood up and came forward to meet me as Thorndu introduced them. "Major Balcan, Captain Labeur, Colonel Zimmerman, Lieutenant Koats, Colonel Gorch, Captain Renyon."

Several of the men brought half-empty glasses of wine to finish while we chatted, and Greta poured more from bottles of Chablis and Chambertin on the serving table. I picked up a glass of white wine myself as I chatted with Thorndu and Captain Labeur. All of the men were friendly enough, except for Colonel Zimmerman. He

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avoided us entirely, sulking by himself near the window. Labeur had been drinking a bit too heavily, and I had just about ruled him out as a possible interviewee when he tapped the side of his wine glass with a spoon and announced, "It's time for a toast!"

"Quiet down, Benny!" Balcan said. He was a handsome grey-haired man who seemed pleasant enough, but it was obvious they'd all heard Labeur's drunken toasts before.

"Perhaps he should lie down," Greta suggested to her grandfather in an undertone.

But there was no stopping Labeur. He raised his wine glass and proclaimed, "A toast to the eight French dancers—Gabrielle, Anne-Marie, Beatrice, Huguette, Dominique, Claudine, Eliane, and Isabelle! May we always defend their honor, or die in the attempt!"

He downed the rest of his wine, but no one else followed. It was as if they were shocked by his outburst. Not a word was spoken and only Zimmerman moved for the first several seconds. He put his glass down on the serving table and strode purposefully from the room.

Balcan and Renyon helped get Captain Labeur upstairs to the spare bedroom. When they returned they assured everyone he would be all right after a bit of a nap. "I've seen him like this before," Renyon assured them. He was shorter and a bit younger than Balcan, but they could have been brothers.

"I'm sorry about this," the general told me. "I expected trouble from Zimmerman, but not Labeur."

"It was no trouble," I assured him. "What did he mean by that toast?"

"One of their wild parties, no doubt. I believe there was a party with a number of dancers the night before we all shipped out to Algiers."

The conversation gradually resumed, and I noticed the general disappear into the kitchen with Greta. When they returned he was carrying an unopened bottle of wine. "Your attention, gentlemen. Since this is, in a way, a twentieth anniversary gathering—twenty years since Vietnam, at least—I have a special treat. We will hold a raffle, and the winner receives this twenty-year-old bottle of fine Medoc!" A murmur of approval came from the officers. "Greta, get us that ice bucket, will you? Please empty it first."

She emptied and dried it, and brought it to her grandfather. "Now—a slip of paper for each of these gentlemen."

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She quickly wrote out slips for Gorch, Koats, Balcan, and Renyon. "What about Zimmerman and Labeur?"

Thorndu thought about it. "Zimmerman, yes. Labeur, no—he's had enough wine already. And sorry, Mr. Carmody, you don't qualify."

The five slips of paper were folded and thoroughly mixed. Then Greta closed her eyes and reached her hand into the bucket. She unfolded the paper and read the name. "Balcan!"

The others were good sports about congratulating the major, and he promptly opened the bottle to share his prize, toasting the general.

"This is very good," I told Thorndu. "Aren't you joining us?"

"No, no. I stick to my Chablis. Are you enjoying yourself, Mr. Carmody?"

"Of course! But which of these men will allow himself to be interviewed?"

"Heaven only knows!" The general turned and called to Colonel Gorch. He was perhaps the closest in age to Thorndu, a blustery, red-faced man who seemed to have a million stories. When I asked him about a scar on his left cheek, he launched into a lengthy account of the Battle of Algiers in '57.

"I was in the Tenth Para Division then," he reminisced. "The FLN terrorists were striking regularly with bomb outrages. We knew the bombs were being manufactured within the city but we were unable to find the factory. Finally it occurred to me that a good bomb factory would need reinforced walls as a safeguard against accidents. We made up a list of unemployed Moslem masons within the city and questioned each of them. Finally we found one who had done the work. I led the raid on the factory myself. It was successful, though one terrorist hurled a grenade that wounded me and three of my men." He touched his face lightly. "This is the scar I still carry."

"It's stories like that I'm seeking," I told him, "but about Vietnam."

Zimmerman came back into the room but stayed away from me. The others came and went too, while Greta kept the wine glasses full. They were obviously making an afternoon of it. I glanced at my watch and was surprised to see it was nearing four o'clock. I also noticed that Major Balcan tried at one point to slip his arm around Greta's waist. I remembered what she'd told me earlier. Balcan was probably the handsomest of the general's luncheon guests, but as

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Greta had observed he was certainly in his fifties—old enough to be her father.

I moved over and tried to intervene. "Major, would you be available for an interview about the Legion's years in Vietnam?"

Balcan glanced at me uncertainly. "I'll give it some thought." He put down his glass and went off to find the bathroom.

"Thank you for coming to my rescue," Greta said with a smile. "He gets like that occasionally, even though I only see him once or twice a year."

"The general has remained close to the men who served under him."

"He feels a great loyalty toward them, as they do toward him."

Colonel Zimmerman approached me and spoke for the first time since our introduction. He had a fierce Germanic look, and I felt that his gleaming bald head was probably not too different from the close-cropped blond hair he might have worn in younger days. "I hear on the news that your president has resigned, Mr. Carmody."

"So they tell me." I'd heard the news in the hotel lobby that morning.

"How will this affect your proposed book?"

"Not at all. My book is about Vietnam, and the various nations who've fought there in the past thirty years. The war might have ended Johnson's presidency, but there were other things that brought down Nixon." I looked him in the eye. "Will you grant me an interview?"

"No. I can tell you nothing of interest."

Out of the corner of my eye I noticed Balcan return to the room and stroll over toward Greta. She was starting to put the wine away, but there were still a few glasses of red and white left. His back was to me as he spoke to her, and I had no idea what was said. I saw a subtle change in General Thorndu's expression, however. He was standing nearby and he acted at once, hurling a glass of Chambertin directly at the man.

Balcan gasped and leaped back, his face, shirt, and tie splattered with the red wine. Thorndu said simply, "You are no longer welcome in this house, sir. You have insulted my granddaughter!"

"I—" The handsome major tried to speak, but Greta laid a hand on his arm. "You'd better go." She wiped the wine from his face with a towel.

The others were surprisingly silent, not knowing what to say. Perhaps they had witnessed this type of scene before. As Balcan

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hurried out to his car, Greta said, "I think we'd all better be going." She lived there, of course, but it was a polite way to announce that the party was over.

"I'm sorry, my dear," Thorndu told her. "I'd just had enough of his pawing you."

"He only asked if he could help me pick up. It was a completely innocent remark. I can't believe you did something like that."

"I must have misunderstood him. I'll phone tomorrow and offer my apology."

"We have to go anyway," Lieutenant Koats said. "Renyon and I will be happy to drop off Labeur if he's unable to drive."

"I'll go see," Greta volunteered. She hurried upstairs to the spare bedroom.

I took the opportunity to arrange a further meeting with Colonel Gorch, who'd seemed most willing to be interviewed. "This reunion will keep me busy for a few days," he said. "After that, perhaps. Are you staying near here?"

"I'd planned on returning to Paris tomorrow, but—"

At that moment Greta hurried back into the room. The color seemed to have drained from her face. "Captain Labeur is dead," she announced. "He shot himself through the head."

We found him lying atop the bed, his head resting on a bloody pillow. A toupee he wore had been singed and pushed askew by the force of the shot to his right temple. A small automatic pistol was clutched in his right hand.

"Did anyone hear the shot?" Zimmerman asked, but apparently no one had. General Thorndu placed a hand across his tired old eyes and asked Greta to phone the police.

"Who would have thought he'd have done this to himself?" Renyon asked. "What a tragedy!"

Colonel Gorch agreed. "Perhaps we see here the last casualty of the Vietnam War."

Greta came back from the phone. "They'll be here shortly."

I was staring down at the big double bed, trying to decide what was missing. Finally it dawned on me. "Wouldn't you have had two pillows on a bed this size?"

She turned, puzzled by my question. "Why—yes, there's a second pillow around somewhere."

But we hadn't found it by the time the local police arrived. They didn't really question the idea of suicide, but they did take down

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everyone's name and inquired about anyone who might have left early. "Major Balcan departed shortly before the body was found," Thorndu said. "But that was my fault. I lost my temper and threw a glass of wine at him."

"Why did you argue?" the detective asked.

"I felt he'd made advances toward my granddaughter. Apparently I was mistaken."

"Was the dead man present during all this?"

"No, he'd been sleeping upstairs for some time."

There were more questions about the gun, but no one knew anything about it. If Labeur brought it with him, no one had been aware of it.

Greta mentioned the toast he'd proposed just before going upstairs. "Was he so shamed by it that he shot himself?" she wondered.

The detective looked around at their faces. "What did the toast refer to?"

General Thorndu shrugged. "A youthful indiscretion. There was a farewell party before they left for Algiers twenty years ago. Some dancers—"

The others looked blank, professing to know nothing about it. I think everyone knew the old general had made up that story, whether he knew the true one or not.

The detective tried to question us about our movements after the luncheon, but I was the only one who'd remained downstairs. Everyone else had gone to the bathroom or somewhere at least once.

The body was finally removed and the other four guests departed. I stayed behind, waiting until Greta Weist could give me a ride back to my hotel.

"Are you all right?" she asked her grandfather. "It's been a terrible afternoon."

"More terrible for Captain Labeur, the poor fellow."

Greta stripped the bloody sheets and pillowcase from the bed and went into the closet for fresh ones. That was when she found the missing pillow, sliced open amidst a flood of feathers. "My God! Why should Labeur have done that?" she wondered.

I stared down at the feathers. "Maybe he didn't."

I went back to Paris the following morning, having arranged for Colonel Gorch to phone me there in a few days, after the conclusion of their reunion dinner. Of them all, he seemed the most willing to grant an interview. Perhaps, as the oldest next to Thorndu himself,

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he felt the need to record some memories before he died.

While I waited for his call, I spent my days wandering around Paris, visiting libraries and even museums in an effort to find the story of the eight French dancers. No one had ever heard the term, and even a small museum of dance yielded no information. One evening I even sat through the semi-nude performances at the Crazy Horse Saloon, and went backstage afterward to speak with the dancers. None could shed any light on my problem, but then they were barely out of their teens. I was talking about something that might have happened two decades earlier.

The phone in my room rang early one morning and I picked it up, expecting to hear the voice of Colonel Gorch. Instead, it was Greta Weist. She was in Paris and wanted to see me. "Let's have lunch," I suggested, naming a place I'd found near the Eiffel Tower.

She was dressed like a fashion model, with a flowered top and ivory skirt that ended just above the knee. I remembered the day she'd met me at the station in Nice. I wondered why I hadn't missed her more in the days that followed my trip there. "It's good to see you again," I told her. "You look delightful."

"What does one wear in Paris during August? I've never been here before in all this heat."

But the restaurant was cool and she settled back to enjoy it. "What brings you up from the South?" I asked.

"My grandfather . . . and you. He hasn't been well since Labeur shot himself. I want to help him if I can."

"Where do I fit in?"

"You know something about it. That pillow—"

I sighed. "Perhaps I should have told the police, but I was afraid of causing trouble for the general."

"What sort of trouble?" She toyed with the salad she'd ordered, obviously more interested in the conversation.

"Greta, I don't believe Captain Labeur committed suicide. I think he was murdered."

"What? But that's impossible!"

"No, it isn't. Everyone was out of the room at least once. Any of them could have done it. There was something I noticed but the police seem to have missed. There were powder burns on his toupee but not on the nearby skin. I wondered about that, and about the fact that none of us heard the shot. When the missing pillow was found in the closet, I guessed how it had been done. The killer entered the room while Labeur slept in a drunken haze. He carefully

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removed the victim's toupee and picked up the other pillow from the bed. He pressed the pillow against Labeur's temple, and placed the toupee between the gun muzzle and the pillow. Then he wrapped Labeur's hand around the gun and squeezed his finger over the trigger. The pillow helped muffle the sound of the shot, but there were powder burns on the toupee, which he returned to the dead man's head the best he could. Then he hid the pillow in the closet, slashing it to disguise the obvious bullet holes."

"Who would have done such a thing? And why?"

"I don't know the *who*. But the motive could well be Labeur's drunken toast to the eight French dancers. It means something, Greta, and even your grandfather isn't being completely honest about it."

"I never heard those names referred to before Captain Labeur offered his toast."

"You attended the big reunion dinner with the general. Was anything mentioned there?"

"No. They drank a toast to fallen comrades during the last year, and Labeur's name was mentioned, but nothing else was said. Certainly nothing about eight French dancers."

I took a notebook from my pocket. "I tried to write down their names later. I have Eliane, Anne-Marie, Dominique, Huguette, Isabelle, and Gabrielle. Whom am I missing?"

"There was a Beatrice. And I think the other was Claudine."

I wrote them down. "The names mean nothing to you?"

"Nothing."

"There were seven men at the luncheon. Might there have been an eighth who died and couldn't make this year's reunion?"

"No, there have always been just the six that Grandfather invited. Next time there will be only five."

After lunch she took me to the top of the Eiffel Tower to view the city. "It's lovely up here," she said. "Even with all the tourists."

I smiled at her. "A place for lovers."

"That too."

We went up to my hotel room while I phoned a theatrical booking agency to learn if there had ever been, perhaps twenty years ago, an act or chorus line known as the Eight French Dancers. They had nothing on it.

I relaxed on the bed, staring at the ceiling, while Greta lit a cigarette and paced the floor. "You know," she said, "there'd be no

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need to call them *French* dancers in this country. The term implies it was used in some other country."

"That's true," I agreed. I was becoming aware of the shared intimacy of our setting, and I sat up on the bed. "You know, there was an old movie I saw on television once, Hitchcock's version of *The 39 Steps*. At the end the hero asks a stage performer called Mr. Memory for the meaning of the 39 Steps and gets an answer before the man is shot dead. If there was a Mr. Memory around, perhaps he'd know about the eight French dancers."

She smiled. "I remember that film too. Do you think it's the name of a spy ring, like the 39 Steps was in the film?"

"There've been stranger things."

"My grandfather or his old officers betraying their country? For what?"

"I suppose you're right," I admitted. "But I'm convinced that his toast posed a danger to one of those men. It was the reason he was killed."

"I should be going," she said, stubbing out her cigarette. "I hardly planned on spending the afternoon in a man's hotel room."

"Stay a while longer," I suggested.

She laughed. "That might tempt you. Or me."

The bedside telephone rang at that moment. I cursed softly and picked it up. "Mr. Carmody? This is Colonel Gorch."

"Yes, Colonel. I was hoping to hear from you."

"I'm afraid I have some bad news. I understand Miss Weist is in Paris to see you and I've been trying to contact her."

"What's happened?"

"Her grandfather, General Thorndu, has suffered a massive heart attack. He's not expected to pull through."

The general died early the following morning, with Greta at his bedside. He never spoke, though he seemed to recognize her presence. I attended the funeral two days later, in Paris. They were all there, the five retired officers who'd been to lunch, and many other Legion members whom I didn't know.

At the military cemetery, where he was buried with full honors, I found myself standing next to the handsome Major Balcan. "It's a great loss to the country," he said somberly.

"Your last meeting was a confrontation," I reminded him.

He waved it away with his hand. "That meant nothing. He had Greta's interests at heart. I would never do anything to harm her, or him."

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"You know about Labeur's death," I said, making it a statement.

"Of course. The police questioned me the same day, but I could tell them nothing. Drink can do terrible things to a man."

"The police are satisfied it was suicide?"

He turned and gave me an odd glance. "Why shouldn't they be?"

"No reason. I was wondering about that toast he proposed, to the eight French dancers. It seemed to shock the rest of you."

"It meant nothing to me. I had no idea what he was talking about."

The honor guard fired a volley of shots into the air as the general's coffin was lowered into its grave. Across from us, Greta stood all in black, being comforted by other relatives. Behind them I could see Renyon and Koats, who'd been two of the pallbearers.

Colonel Zimmerman stood with Colonel Gorch. Apparently their rank had given them a special position in the funeral procession. When the ceremony was over, I intercepted Zimmerman as he returned to his car. "You wouldn't talk to me earlier. I wondered if your attitude had changed with the general's death."

"Not at all. You must understand, Mr. Carmody, that events occur under the stress of wartime situations that are best kept to ourselves, within the Legion family."

"The eight French dancers? Did you know any of them personally?"

He smiled. "Goodbye, Mr. Carmody. I doubt that we will see each other again."

Once more I arranged to meet with Colonel Gorch, at my hotel the following Monday. Then I walked back to my car and watched as Greta Weist and the others were escorted to their waiting limousines. I started the engine and drove back to the hotel.

Greta Weist returned on Saturday evening. We both knew there was something unfinished between us. "Is the family taking it pretty well?" I asked as I let her into my room.

"I was closer to him than anyone else, and I can't be too sad that he's gone. He had a good life for almost eighty years, and when you consider the danger of it, the end came pretty easily for him."

She was dressed this time in jeans and a shirt, still fashionable but much more casual than the other times I'd seen her. The shirt was knotted at her waist, showing just a bit of skin. She sat down by the window and took out a cigarette.

"Gorch is coming to see me on Monday," I told her. "Maybe then I'll get some answers."

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"Not about the dancers, you won't. Gorch has a million stories but he's loyal to the men he served with."

"I guess I should forget it and go back to America after the interview."

She pushed off her shoes and wiggled her bare toes. "And I to London. August is almost over."

"I'm sorry about the general. He was a fine old man."

"He was that."

"Should I call room service and order us some food?"

She smiled up at me. "That would be nice."

Greta rolled over on the bed and sat up, brushing the hair from her eyes. "Mr. Memory!" she said suddenly.

"What's that?"

"You said the other day you wished there was a Mr. Memory, like in that film. Well, in a way there is!"

"Who's that?" I got up and wandered over to the room service cart, finishing off the last of the champagne.

"It's an old man named Sawyer. My grandfather mentioned him many times. He's sort of a Foreign Legion buff, knows everything about them."

Now I was interested. "Where is he? Can we talk to him?"

"He's in his eighties, but his mind is still sharp. He lives in a nursing home in the Clichy area of the city."

"It's worth a try. Let's go see him."

I dressed quickly and we ate a quick breakfast downstairs. The Paris streets were given over to tourists on that last Sunday in August, and we reached the nursing home in good time. Greta had been there once before, with her grandfather, and when the nurse showed us to the sun porch where Sawyer was resting he recognized her at once. He was a shriveled old man in a wheelchair but his mind and memory were alert.

"Greta! How good to see you again! I read about your grandfather's death and wished I could have attended the funeral."

"He spoke of you often, and fondly." She turned to me. "This is an American friend of mine. Paul Carmody. He's doing a book about Vietnam and we've come across a bit of a mystery. I told him if anyone could answer a question about the French Foreign Legion it was you."

"You're too kind to an old man, Greta. But I will do the best I can. What is your question, young man?"

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"Who were the eight French dancers?"

Sawyer's open expression clouded. He stared off at the wall as if trying to remember, and then shook his head. "I don't know. I've never heard the expression before."

My heart sank at his words. It was another dead end.

But Greta wasn't yet ready to give up. "Perhaps that was a name Labeur himself invented. Mr. Sawyer, did you ever hear of these eight women—Eliane, Claudine, Huguette, Anne-Marie, Gabrielle, Beatrice, Isabelle, and Dominique?"

His eyes opened wider and seemed to clear. He smiled. "Of course, but they weren't women. They were the names given to the eight fortified hills surrounding the French base at Dien Bien Phu."

"The eight French dancers," I said softly.

"The defenses were poorly conceived from the beginning," the old man continued, warming to his subject. "When the Viet Minh attacked, the airstrip was knocked out on virtually the first day. And once Beatrice fell, the other positions went like toppling dominoes. It was a disaster for the Legion, despite the later myth of their heroic resistance. And a disaster for France too, the final act of their involvement in Vietnam. The French pulled out, and the Americans were gradually pulled in."

I nodded and turned to Greta. "When Labeur proposed that toast, someone feared he was ready to tell me everything about the battle, for my book. That person killed him, rather than have the Legion further discredited."

"Do you know who did it?"

I thought about it and realized that I'd known all along.

We were driving back toward the center of the city, moving quickly in the light Sunday traffic, when I became aware of the car that was picking up speed behind us. "I think we're being followed," I told Greta.

"The tan Volvo again? I thought it was trailing us on the way to the nursing home, but then I decided I must be wrong."

I turned quickly down a street that led along the river, but the car stayed on our tail. "Hang on!"

"He's trying to force us off the road!" she yelled as the car came up fast on our left, edging us over.

I spun the steering wheel and deliberately bumped his right front fender, but it didn't discourage him. He was out to get us. He'd followed us to the nursing home and must have realized the reason

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for our visit. Perhaps he feared that old Sawyer, the Legion buff, had told us even more than he had.

At that instant we heard the pulsating siren of a fire engine approaching fast. It rounded the corner before the driver of the Volvo ever saw it. I had only a glimpse of his horrified face as the big engine crushed the side of his car.

Greta screamed as our car shuddered with the impact. We went over the curb and blew a tire. I climbed out quickly, making certain she was all right, and hurried to the other car. The firemen were trying to pry open the driver's door. "What in hell was he doing on the wrong side of the road?" one of them asked in angry French.

"Radio for an ambulance," someone said.

"It doesn't matter. He's dead."

I walked back to Greta. "Did you see his face?" she asked.

I nodded. "Just before the crash. It was Major Balcan."

Greta was still with me when Colonel Gorch arrived at the hotel for lunch on Monday. "I fear there's another funeral to attend," he said. "Did you hear about Balcan?"

I nodded. "We were there."

"What's that? I heard he died in a collision with a fire truck."

"He was trying to force us off the road at the time," Greta explained. "We'd been to see old Sawyer, the Legion buff, and Balcan followed us to the nursing home. He tried to kill us to hide the fact that he'd murdered Captain Labeur."

Gorch shook his head sadly. "I should have known he'd try something crazy like that. But what could Sawyer have told you about Labeur's death?"

"He identified the eight French dancers," I told him. "He told us about Dien Bien Phu."

"Labeur was the only one who ever called them the eight French dancers. I remember it was on the day we pulled out. He said those eight fortified positions with the girls' names had been about as much help against the Viet Minh as eight French dancers would have been. When he proposed that toast in front of you I think we all must have realized he was going to tell you the whole story of the battle, and the individual acts of carelessness and cowardice that caused its loss." He paused and asked, "But how did you know it was Balcan?"

I sighed, glancing at Greta. "Excuse me, but this has to do with your grandfather. You know the general drank only white wine. He

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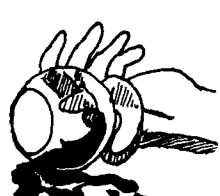
told me that and I saw it for myself on a couple of occasions. He was drinking white wine that afternoon when I arrived at the villa. Then why was he holding a glass of red wine when he became angry at Major Balcan and threw it at him? There were still untouched glasses of white wine remaining on the serving table, yet he had picked up a glass of red. It occurred to me that he must have chosen the red for the specific purpose of throwing it at Balcan. He wanted to stain the man's face and shirt. And I realized that the murderer, no matter how carefully he placed the pillow and toupee and wrapped his fingers around the drunken man's hand, could hardly have avoided a drop or two of the blood that soaked into the bedding. Major Balcan returned to the room with blood on his shirt, and in that instant General Thorndu realized what he'd done. To protect Balcan, the general picked up a glass of the red wine he never drank, pretended anger over the treatment of his granddaughter, and hurled it at Labeur's killer."

"The wine stain hid the blood," Greta said softly. "Grandfather was afraid you'd notice the drops and realize the truth once the body was found."

Colonel Gorch nodded. "The general always protected his men. Dien Bien Phu was a tragedy for us all. No one wanted their acts revealed."

It was Greta who asked the question. "If it was a tragedy for all of you, why was it Balcan who felt strongly enough to commit murder?"

Gorch merely stared at us with tired eyes that had seen too many battles. "Things like this have happened before, over the years. Who can say what is right and wrong in a world gone mad? You see, Major Balcan had to do it, because he won the raffle."



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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

To what extent can one prominent flaw or a catalog of minor ones undermine the pleasure and validity of an otherwise admirable piece of work? Conan Doyle himself admitted that "Silver Blaze" was full of horse racing errors, but it remains one of the most popular Sherlock Holmes stories. In his famous essay "The Simple Art of Murder," Raymond Chandler strongly questioned the plausibility of A.A. Milne's 1922 novel *The Red House Mystery,* along with E.C. Bentley's *Trent's Last Case* and works of Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers, all of which are still read and highly regarded as detective fiction cornerstones. The 1933 film version of S.S. Van Dine's *The Kennel Murder Case,* directed by Michael Curtiz, is regarded as a classic of the screen whodunit despite a serious plot defect not present in the source novel: the murderer has no reason to be in the location that Philo Vance's elaborate reconstruction of the crime requires.

I use these examples to justify giving high marks to an enthralling and thoughtful new crime novel, one far removed in milieu and intent from Golden Age puzzles but which features an implausible element in its way just as glaring.

**** Jay Brandon: *Rules of Evidence,* Pocket, $20. In a markedly better book than his 1990 Edgar nominee *Fade the Heat,* Brandon introduces San Antonio defense lawyer Raymond Boudro, an African-American who takes on the defense of a possibly bigoted white cop accused of murder. That the accused still thinks of himself as a cop makes the lawyer-client relationship especially interesting: in a way, they're on the same side, but in another way, they aren't. Writing, construction, and characterization are all excellent in the kind of book that grips the reader early and doesn't let go until the end. The problem is that part of the plot depends on the assumption that an undercover police officer on trial for murder in a large city could successfully keep his face out of the media. I don't believe it.

**** John Katzenbach: *Just Cause,* Putnam, $22.95. In another novel turning on the relationship between a police officer and a civilian, investigative reporter Matthew Cowart goes to bat for Florida Death Row inmate Robert Earl Ferguson, whose forced confession to a rape/murder may have been false. The journalist gets a new trial for Ferguson and a Pulitzer Prize for himself, but the story is far from over. This crime novel of 400-plus pages seems to have revealed its main surprises before the halfway point, leaving the reader to wonder whether the rest

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of the book will try to sustain interest through pure suspense (a risky course) or produce more surprises. Katzenbach does a masterful job, teaming Cowart with intense black policeman Tanny Brown while drawing a parallel between the job of a reporter and that of a cop, with similar roles in information gathering and similar guilt when things go wrong.

*** James Lee Burke: *A Stained White Radiance,* Hyperion, $19.95. Dave Robichaux, police detective of New Iberia, Louisiana, investigates a case involving a family he has known all his life: the very dysfunctional Sonniers, whose ranks include a successful televangelist, an Amnesty International stalwart, and an oilman. One member also married a pernicious political candidate with a clear parallel in recent Louisiana politics. Burke, whose *Black Cherry Blues* (1989) won an Edgar for best novel, has roots in mainstream literary fiction that show in the fine prose, but he also has the mastery of plot and pace essential to good crime fiction. (With Lawrence Block's Matt Scudder, Robichaux is one of the mystery genre's most prominent AA members.)

*** Aaron Elkins: *Make No Bones,* Mysterious, $17.95. In the latest entry from another Edgar-winning series (for 1987's *Old Bones*), Gideon Oliver and wife Julie attend a conference of the Western Association of Forensic Anthropologists in Bend, Oregon. For some of the group's founding members, the death of a not-so-beloved mentor at an earlier conference continues to reverberate when the man's charred bones, which he had willed to science, vanish. Elkins, one of the best current practitioners of the pure formal whodunit, is in solid form here.

*** William Bernhardt: *Primary Justice,* Ballantine, $5.99. This fictional debut of a Tulsa attorney is impressive, with a likeable main character in Ben Kincaid, the fascinating background of a large corporate law firm, and a nicely worked out plot involving an adoption case and dubious practices by one of the firm's largest clients. Some of the situations and dialogue have a bit too much of a made-for-TV feel, but the novel is smooth and enjoyable enough to make the tendency forgivable.

*** E.X. Ferrars: *Danger from the Dead,* Doubleday/Perfect Crime, $18.50. Schoolmaster Gavin Cleaver comes to vacation in the guest cottage of his brother Nigel and wife Annabel, a famous romance novelist recovering from a stroke. Also in attendance is Annabel's actress sister Caroline, the principal attraction for shy bachelor Gavin. Murders follow and are resolved with Ferrars's customary knack for plot and people. In addition to wondering who the murderer is, the reader can ponder who will be the detective.

*** Celia Fremlin: *Dangerous Thoughts,* Doubleday/Perfect Crime, $15.00. How's this for a tantalizing opening situation? Clare Wakefield's journalist husband Edwin has escaped his terrorist captors in the Middle East and is on his way home, and TV asks her

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that standard question, "How do you feel?" The truth is she was getting along very happily without him. As the complex story develops, it begins to resemble Francis Iles's classic *Before the Fact* with its married-to-a-murderer suspense angle, a grim situation handled with a delightful measure of humor. Fremlin, who won a best-novel Edgar for *The Hours Before Dawn* (1959), is an unfailingly entertaining writer, as *EQMM* readers well know.

*** Lillian O'Donnell: *Pushover,* Putnam, $19.95. New York police Lt. Norah Mulcahaney, who debuted in 1972, celebrates (sort of) her fortieth birthday and works on two virtually coequal and apparently unconnected cases: a homeless-garbed serial killer who pushes young women in front of subway trains and an octogenarian actress's death in defense of her visiting grandson, who vanishes and becomes the subject of a ransom demand. This is a satisfying mystery, combining detection and suspense with solid professionalism and the sense of theatricality that characterizes former actress O'Donnell's work.

** George Baxt: *The Greta Garbo Murder Case,* St. Martin's, $17.95. The latest in Baxt's series about fictional L.A. cop Herbert Villon and his interactions with real-life movie people in the period between the world wars does a very good job with Garbo: see especially her deliciously witty dialogue with Marion Davies on why they don't have children (pp. 3-4). Also interestingly characterized are Erich Von Stroheim, Peter Lorre, and William Haines. On the other hand, the plot, involving Nazi spies and a film version of Joan of Arc, is unremarkable; Sam Goldwyn's malapropisms are too frequent for credibility; and something must be done to curb Baxt's jarring anachronisms (e.g., "Cool it"; "that mother Stalin"; and the concept of one person "relating to" another).

** Robert Crais: *Lullaby Town,* Bantam, $18.50. Los Angeles private eye Elvis Cole spends most of his time in Connecticut and New York in his third case, seeking the long-lost wife and son of Peter Alan Nelsen, a quintessential jerk who is third only to Spielberg and Lucas in power and influence among Hollywood action directors. The first third of the book is fine, but it trails off some once the main mystery is solved. My interest wavered with every appearance of some standard-issue gangsters. Crais is strong on style, though, and the book will appeal to fans of Robert B. Parker's Spenser and other wisecracking-but-oh-so-sensitive tough guys.

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Like many other writers, J.W. Whitehead finds inspiration for his fiction in boyhood memories. As a child of twelve, he lived in a neighborhood of North Philadelphia with a cemetery similar to the eerie, self-contained space depicted in "The White Mansion." Of course, it is largely from within the differently shaped world of childhood that the contours of Mr. Whitehead's fictional and remembered places are perceived, but he does want to note that the people who inhabited the real cemetery were quite unlike those of his imagination. . . .

THE WHITE MANSION

by J. W. WHITEHEAD

Inside the cemetery, it was like a different world. Outside the high stone walls, North Philadelphia. Long-haired white kids who wanted your money, even your transfer pass for the bus, black kids with leather riding gloves stretched over their brass knuckles, who just wanted to see you hurt. Stop-and-go traffic down every narrow street, and trash piled against the curbs as if they'd held a parade every morning.

You have to understand how different things seemed when you got inside the walls. Like crossing into a different dimension. The first thing you noticed when you got inside, even before the acres of stone lined up like dominoes, was how green everything was. Dark green, shade green. The air was at least five degrees cooler inside the walls. The next thing you noticed was the quiet, the dead quiet. And then it hit you, that as far as you could see in any direction were the gravestones.

The first few times my friend Jimmy and I went in to visit Rex, we had a problem walking through the grave plots. We had grown up across the street from each other, and about a block and a half away from a tiny Catholic cemetery crammed so tight with plots that the speculation was they'd started putting them in the ground on end. The place had closed to new business before we were born.

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People still came every once in a while to remember their dead, old people who would have to find some other place for their own remains. Standing on Jimmy's stoop at just the right time on a summer night, the moon would glow off one particular stone and give us a monster case of the creeps.

So stepping into Rex's cemetery wasn't something we did lightly. The dead scared me. I wanted no part of it. But Jimmy, I could see, harbored a certain dumb fascination. At twilight the bats flew in from whatever dark nesting place they'd found in North Philadelphia during the day. Rex had told us about his air guns and the bats, about shooting these small black shapes that circled the trees near the house, about the unbelievable feeling when you shot and one of the shapes dropped like a stone out of the sky.

I thought Rex was weird. Jimmy wanted to see the bats. It bugged me, but I came along.

Rex lived all alone in the cemetery with just his parents, lived in this shaded, silent world of perpetual care. Rex's father was caretaker of the cemetery, a short guy with arms like Popeye's, and always with a quarter-inch of dirt caked under his nails, as if he dug the graves by hand. He told us we should call him Roy.

Roy had a motorcycle, a fat green hog as big as a small horse. He tuned the machine every day, the way you might tune a piano, so fine that you could hear the pitch of the engine actually change when he reached in with a socket wrench and twisted this or loosened that. "Just like a woman," he said to us, his face full of smiling teeth. "Have to know how to keep them tuned."

Roy had a scar along his forehead, a nasty thing. It gave me the chills to look at it. He saw Jimmy and me staring at it. "You know what this is?" he said. It was like a furrow, a small crease in his skull, and he ran his finger along it. He offered to let us do the same, but we declined. "This is from a gunshot," he said. "A hunting accident. You've got to know how to use a gun, right Rex?" Rex wouldn't look at him.

Roy gave us rides on his green hog. I held Roy daintily, afraid to hug him, afraid to let him feel my fear. I think he felt it anyway. I got bigger wheelies than the other two, went for longer rides at faster speeds. I got the feeling that Roy didn't really care if he flipped the thing, or ran it into a tree. Like he was sure he would never die. I got mad at myself every time I agreed to ride with him. It seemed needlessly careless.

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In fact, within a couple visits, everything about visiting the cemetery made me miserable. When I went to Rex's place for a visit, I always wished I were someplace else—home reading, or watching television, or out shooting baskets. Inside the cemetery walls, Rex acted like he was king, and he surveyed all those grim rows of ripening limestone like a rich man. A despot king.

The first few times Jimmy and I went over, we didn't shoot. This was a relief to me, since I had no desire to kill any living thing, not even a bat, though I admit they gave me the creeps. We sat in Rex's cold bedroom high up in the house—the grey mansion we called it—beyond the effective range of the radiators, listening to records and insulting the girls in school. Rex was new to our school that year. He'd transferred from another junior high, and we never got a straight answer from him as to why. Of course, knowing what I know now, I could make a safe guess.

Rex's mother would bring us hot cider and those spice cookies you only seem to be able to buy in October and early November, as if they harvested them then. Both Roy and Mrs. Harper were getting up in years, much older than regular parents like Jimmy's or mine, almost like an aunt and uncle taking care of Rex. His mother seemed especially old and complained of the dampness and chill in the house. From what I could see, Roy ignored her, because the grey mansion continued slowly to crumble while he was out making the vast reaches of the cemetery immaculate.

The grey mansion hadn't been properly painted in years and might never have been painted grey in the first place—it might just have *looked* grey. Towering sycamore and willow trees surrounded the place, cutting off any light. The yard was all dirt and exposed tree roots and maintenance supplies: sawhorses, old, rusting tools, a useless winch lying against the fat trunk of one of the sycamores. In season, the sycamores dropped furry balls of seed everywhere, left to litter the yard like marbles from a childhood game, clogging the gutters of the house, making the porch steps like a roller rink. At night the bats roosted in the trees close to the house and called to each other, and flitted from branch to branch leaving their droppings all over the yard.

I could see how lonely it could get here for a kid our age. And I could see what Rex was doing. He knew he had Jimmy on the hook as long as Jimmy was wondering about the guns. For a couple weeks, Rex didn't even show them to us. I began to fidget more when we were there. Rex put up with me because I was part of the package.

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I came with Jimmy. We rode the trolley home every day from school, we collaborated on school reports (I did most of the work), we played basketball. And now, more and more, we went to the cemetery.

Rex told us about how, sometimes, he and Roy would go hunting together through the cemetery, just at nightfall. I couldn't picture it. They seemed afraid of each other, circled each other like wild animals. If Roy was afraid of anything, he was afraid of Rex. Rex said they hunted bats, birds, and squirrels. Jimmy wanted to know if he could see them hunt, and asked how many guns they had.

Rex said they had enough for everybody. It made me sick to my stomach.

I took to doing my homework at Rex's, not because I was such a great student, but because the gun talk was so boring. I would go down into the kitchen and work at the kitchen table, where Rex's mother would be cooking dinner. She made things from scratch, always with too much salt. Her eyes were going, that was how old she was. She spent her days balancing the cemetery books and scheduling burials, and by the end of the day she found it easier to work with salt than to fumble with all the different seasonings you could put into things. She hated the gun talk, I could see that, and she thought I was the greatest thing since sliced bread, since I'd rather be doing homework than shooting holes in small animals that couldn't harm or feed me.

Sometimes I went for walks, long walks to let off steam, because I wouldn't want either Jimmy or Rex to know how mad it made me that they could sit for hours and talk about guns. By now Rex had begun letting Jimmy hold a gun. He was paying out the line slowly, and Jimmy was nibbling like a carp.

One time I got lost while out walking. That was how big the place was. I wandered past gravestones and monuments that, after a while, tended to look familiar, as if I'd passed them before. But most of the stones were identical, or so they seemed. I had no idea where I was.

Then I saw another house, one I'd never seen before, had never suspected was there. It was entirely unlike the one Rex and his parents lived in. That was my first thought. It was white, unshaded but for a pair of well-placed, columnar oaks by the front walk, and as smartly tailored as a southern plantation house. The windows were excessively tall, as they were in Rex's house, now that I thought of it, almost floor to ceiling on the first floor, and from a

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woman's knees to a foot above a man's head on the second. And then it hit me. I was looking at the same house, down to the lines of the grey mansion's porch, the slope of the roof, the height and placement of the two chimneys, the gabled boathouse window in the third floor, where Rex's room would have been. It was just much nicer. And probably twice the size. Rex's house was like a scale model of the white mansion. Suddenly the grey mansion didn't seem like a mansion anymore. It was just an old grey house.

"Where's your buddies?"

Roy. I spun around to find him waiting on me, his face up into the sunshine, which seemed as plentiful here near this house as it did anywhere in the cemetery. His scar had a shiny grey look in the bright light.

"They're back talking about guns," I said. "Who lives here?"

"What, you don't like guns?"

"No," I said, and saw my mistake too late. I'd made an issue of something where there didn't need to be one.

"Why not?" he said, and I could see he was having fun with me, and it didn't matter if I wanted to join him in the fun or not.

"Who lives here?" I said. He made me angry, because he treated me as if I'd never be anything but a dumb kid he could tease.

"Did Rex tell you about this place?"

"No. I found it myself. So who lives here?"

He lost interest in me then. "What's it to you?" he said.

Maybe somebody else would have decided earlier that there was something wrong between the three of them—Roy, Rex, and his mother. The way I finally decided was by watching her. She tried too hard. She seemed happiest when she had one arm around Rex and the other around Roy, as if she were trying to conduct some emotional current of love back and forth from one to the other. Roy would pull away, disappear. Probably to the white mansion.

That was how I took to thinking of it: the white mansion. I asked Rex about it, but he avoided me, showed Jimmy how to pump the gun several times for more power, how to sight low to allow for the kick when you pumped the gun higher.

"Does somebody *live* there?" I said.

"No," said Rex.

"What does it matter?" said Jimmy. He was finally getting impatient—he thought it was about time to go out, start shooting.

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"I just want to know," I said to him. "You didn't see this place." Then to Rex: "If nobody's living there, why aren't *you* living there? It's nicer than this place."

"You're a jerk, you know that?" said Rex. He took a swing at me and we were all over each other. Jimmy let us fight for a couple minutes, and Rex used his size to pin me. Then Jimmy pulled him off, once it was clear who had won.

I will never forget (though I have tried) the brief time in my life when I shot a gun. It was a cool, two-week window in November, approaching Thanksgiving, when Jimmy and I—and Rex, if he wanted—should have been out throwing a football. I told myself I didn't have any problem with hanging out with Rex, though it bothered me that Rex seemed to monopolize Jimmy's attention. After the fight I was just doing what I could to be included.

One day Rex took us out to the machine shop across the yard, gave us the guns, and said it was time to hunt. The three of us went out to the south quadrant, and sprawled under shrubs or behind headstones. Our guns were aimed at the grey face of a mausoleum. Jimmy shot a bat. Two pumps, bang, and the thing dropped. Jimmy was like that: good at anything from the minute he picked it up. Rex put down two more in three shots. Rex was a great shot, anyone would say so except Roy. I shot twice and was lucky to hit air. I can't even remember now if I aimed. One of the downed bats was only missing a wing. It flopped and flapped. Walking up to it, Rex pumped the gun again and again, more than he needed to, put it to the tiny black body, and blew it away.

Then he took out a knife and slit a small notch in his thumb. He called us over and told us to hold out our thumbs.

"Why?" said Jimmy. I was happy he'd said it instead of me.

"So I can cut them. Then we're going to stick them into the bat."

"Why?" Jimmy said again.

"He wants us to be blood brothers," I said. I made it sound as stupid as it was.

Rex didn't say anything.

"Don't bats have diseases, like rabies?"

"That's vampire bats," said Rex. "This isn't a vampire bat."

Even if it was, you couldn't tell now. It was just raw tissue and gristle and bone.

"I'm not doing it," I said.

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"Too bad for you, then," said Rex. "I'll just do it myself. If you crybabies don't want to, you don't have to."

Jimmy said, "Wait. Here." He stuck out his thumb.

Rex said, "Do you want to do it?"

Jimmy took the knife and cut his thumb, a small cut, but he squeezed it until the blood came. Then they bent down on either side of the tiny body, touched their thumbs to it, and quickly rubbed their thumbs in the grass.

As the days went by, no one said anything to me about it, but it was there between us, that I hadn't made their stupid blood oath, that I hadn't made my first kill. Jimmy wanted to go over to the cemetery every day. He was anxious about his thumb, which had become a vivid shade of purple around the cut. When we got home from the cemetery every day, we would go around the corner and I would paint the thumb with iodine, and he would scream. He wore a large bandage on it to hide it from his mother. Slowly it got better, and he forgot about how stupid he'd been.

Sometimes I just let Jimmy go to the cemetery by himself and rode the trolley home alone, feeling hurt. I was sick with desire to please them, daydreamed about shooting rabbits cleanly in midstride, of walking up to their twitching bodies afterwards, sick with victory, pumping the gun with mercy in my heart.

One evening Rex saw a small bird flutter into range and shot at it. He nicked the wing. The bird shook in a panic. Jimmy watched it shaking, hesitated to shoot. Bats were one thing—ugly, creepy-looking. Birds were another. He shot and missed, badly. I saw my opening. I sighted properly for the first time in my life, steadied myself. My first shot went wide and ticked off a stone. The bird was moving a little now, toward the shade of a weeping willow. I pumped the gun six times and called for the shot. Rex brought his gun down slowly. Curious. When I sighted, I had the bird's swollen chest. I shot it, dead on. The bird bounced off the wall of a mausoleum fifteen yards behind it and back toward us. Rex and Jimmy were all smiles, impressed. "Hitting a scared bird isn't easy," said Rex.

I was content to let it go right there. To walk away, put down my gun, and hope I could get to sleep again one of these nights. Rex and Jimmy wanted to go see the bird. There was just enough left in the right places to know it had been a sparrow. Then Rex took us back to the mausoleum wall. There was a sunburst of blood where the bird hit.

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I thought they might lose interest after I was one of them, but it was just the opposite. It got more savage. Rex would suggest we look for rats, and they'd wind up getting a squirrel. Go for a squirrel and they'd wind up with a rabbit. Birds were always fair game.

I stopped carrying a gun. I was tagging along with them now like a lame hunting dog. I began to think Jimmy was intolerably stupid. I began to hate Rex.

I probably would never have thought again about the white mansion if Rex's entire family hadn't acted so weird about it. I never got a straight answer. One time I was with Rex's mother in her kitchen. She was making homemade minestrone. A salty steam came off it, making my mouth water at the same time it stung my eyes. Rex and Jimmy were off killing small animals again.

"Why do you come over here if you don't like to shoot the guns?" she asked.

"I think it's because he's in love with you, dear."

Roy, always sneaking up behind me. He was making fun of her just as he made fun of me. "Or," he said, "maybe he just loves salt." He went out the kitchen door saying, "I'll be back in an hour or two."

"But dinner'll be ready in less than an hour now, Roy."

Closing the door, he said, "Keep it warm, then."

I let his presence fade from the kitchen for a while. I hated Roy and Rex. I couldn't tell which one I hated more. I hated what I'd done to that bird. It was all I could think about—what I'd gotten myself into in this cemetery, losing my best friend, losing my self-respect. It seemed conceivable that I could learn to hate everything if I stuck around long enough. Then I said to her, "What's that other house doing here in the cemetery?"

She stopped stirring a moment, then started again. "The white one, you mean?" Too even, too cool.

"Yes."

"It's kind of a show place," she said. "The original owner lived there, back when this was an estate. This house was always the caretaker's house. Roy likes to keep the other place up. It's kind of like a hobby. I haven't been out to see it in years."

"Oh."

"Why do you want to know, dear?"

"I don't know. It just seems a shame to let it go to waste."

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* * *

I began to take walks more often. I think even Jimmy and Rex started to wonder why I still came over. I was alone most of the time. It got past Thanksgiving. People started counting down shopping days until Christmas. I now knew by heart the way from the grey house to the white mansion.

One time, about a week before Christmas, I saw Roy's motorcycle parked outside the white mansion. I went up on the porch and tried the door. It was open. I don't know how I got myself to do it, but I went in. I suppose I hated everything so much, it caused a disregard for my own safety.

The first floor was empty, just the long curtains and draperies tied back at each window. The house didn't smell musty or closed-up, just lonely. I came into a room that twenty people could have waltzed through without bumping into each other. It was one whole side of the mansion—the living room, dining room, guest room, and powder room from Rex's house, only it seemed to keep going long after you'd have been out the other side of Rex's house and into the yard. I'd never been in a room that big.

Then I heard a noise upstairs. I'm not sure how, but I knew there was something very wrong with the white mansion as soon as I heard that noise. I had the feeling that just knowing what that noise was would be enough to get even with all of them.

It turned out I was right.

The next day I said I was going hunting again. I carried a rifle, though I didn't intend to use it. Rex and Jimmy hardly noticed I was there, but I was, sighting imaginary squirrels and snakes and blue jays, pointing us ever closer to the white mansion. After a while Rex saw where it seemed we were headed, but he couldn't say no to a sighted animal in front of Jimmy, could he? Of course not. I'd call out one thing after another, and Jimmy would be on my heels, and Rex would have to follow.

At a certain point we came over the lip of a gentle hill and there it was, the white mansion, about the size of a well-packed snowball, off in the distance.

"What is *that?*" said Jimmy. To me he said, "Is that the place you were talking about before?"

"It's something, isn't it?" I said.

Rex wouldn't look at it.

Jimmy said to him, "Who lives there?"

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"Nobody," said Rex.

"What do you mean, nobody? It's just sitting there, going to waste?"

"It's not exactly going to waste," I said, "right Rex?" My heart was pounding so hard it hurt. I looked at Rex. He was looking at me as if he could have killed me. For a moment it even frightened me, until I thought about it: Rex pointing a rifle at me, pulling the trigger. Impossible.

"Why don't we go in, then?" said Jimmy. "I mean, if nobody's living there, we could shoot at things like from a fort, out the windows on the second floor, even the third floor." He thought this was a brilliant idea, I could tell. Stupid Jimmy, saying just what I knew he'd say.

"No," said Rex. "We can't."

"Why not?" Jimmy said.

"Yeah," I said, trying to make my smile look like Roy's. "Why not?"

And that was honestly where I thought it would end. I thought Rex might make up some incredibly lame lie. I even considered the possibility that he might be mad enough at his father to tell us the truth—about the one room Roy had fixed up in the white mansion, an impossibly plush bedroom with red draperies and immense cherrywood furnishings and a canopy over the huge bed. About his father's guests.

What I never expected was when Rex released me from the rage in his eyes, and turned to stare at the white mansion. He went at the house, pumping his gun again and again, the spring action harder and harder to work. I looked at the back of him as he humped along through the grave plots like a monster. This guy is weird, I thought.

"Hey, Rex, where you going?" said Jimmy, and started to follow.

I didn't know where Rex thought he was going either, not even after he disappeared inside the white mansion. Maybe I was too innocent. Or maybe I was just thick. I held Jimmy back. "I don't think we better go," I said.

When we heard Rex's gun go off, we dropped our guns and ran. We heard a woman screaming, and then that stopped too. We never heard a thing about it in the news, so I guess everybody survived. On the other hand, like I say, it was a different world in there. Maybe news didn't get out. Anyway, we climbed the nearest wrought-iron gate and ran to the trolley stop, hopped a trolley home, and good riddance to Rex—he never showed up at our school again. I suppose it was time for another transfer.●

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a *NEW* short story by

ROBERT BARNARD

From the inimitable Robert Barnard, a wickedly satirical tale of a scheming young woman and her best-laid plans. . . .

A SURE-FIRE SPECULATION

by ROBERT BARNARD

"Who are you going to the Y.C.s' dance with?" Jennifer Daly was asked by her friend Sharon as they stood in the queue at a sandwich bar one lunchtime.

The Young Conservatives' dances were about the only activity in Felton, a small Derbyshire town not very far from Derby itself. Going to the dances did not imply conservatism, or even youth: it was just a way of showing you were alive. Jennifer Daly certainly was alive—blonde, cool, and just twenty-one, though there were very few people who could say they knew her well.

"Well, don't say anything yet, because he doesn't know: I'm going with Simon Slocum."

"Simon Slocum? But he's dull as ditchwater!"

"Yes, he is. . . . I'm going to marry him."

"You're what?"

"I'm going to marry him."

"You mean you're engaged?"

"No, I mean when he asks me I'm going to say yes."

By now they were outside in the street and well away from any listening ears.

"How do you know he's going to ask you?" Jennifer's friend said, thinking that Jennifer was showing a rare flight of imagination.

"Signs . . . I've been working on him."

"But why are you going to marry him? You said yourself he's as dull as ditchwater."

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Jennifer considered how best to put it.

"Somehow or other I don't seem to think like other girls. The whole romantic thing has passed me by. When other people get warm feelings I just think: 'How silly!' I'm a practical person, and I just take the practicalities into account."

"What do you mean by practicalities?"

"Home, income, secure future, that sort of thing."

"But Simon Slocum is no great catch by those lights. He's just a bank clerk in Derby."

"Ah, but you see, he has Great Expectations."

"Who from? His father's a retired policeman."

"An uncle. His mother's eldest brother. Very rich. Lives in a very grand house in the centre of Buxton."

"But Jenny, you can't marry him relying on his inheriting that money! It's too sordid! Anyway, he could change his mind, this uncle, and make a new will. You'd be reduced to courting his favour, maybe for years and years till he died."

"Oh no he couldn't, and oh no we wouldn't."

"What do you mean?"

"He has Alzheimer's disease. He's not mentally competent to make a new will. Alzheimer's is irreversible. He doesn't recognize anyone anymore. Simon has stopped going up there to see him. We'd just sit around waiting to collect."

"Are you *sure* of this, Jenny?"

"Oh yes, quite sure. The woman who nurses him is a friend of my mother's. Told us about it in a letter. That's how I came to think of Simon like that."

"Well, but you *are* the practical one!"

But Jenny's friend, in her heart, was using very much harsher words than "practical."

In the short term Jenny's plans worked out beautifully. At the Young Conservatives' dance she gave Simon the sort of attention he was not used to getting from girls in Fenton. She flattered him, but in a subtle, indirect way, because though she thought him a bore she did not think him a fool. When they kissed goodnight, coolly, she told him to call her again soon. Within a fortnight they had been to the cinema twice, to a pub quiz, a race meeting at York, and a talk on the money supply. Jenny's mother told her neighbours that her daughter's new boyfriend was quiet but ever so nice, and told her friends that he was nice but ever so quiet. She thought in her heart that he was the sort of young man you could never get

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really close to. Jennifer herself had no such doubts. As soon as the topic of marriage came up she made it clear that that was in her mind too. As soon as they were formally engaged she told Simon that she did not believe in long engagements.

"I don't want a slap-bang wedding," she said. "I mean, it's like showing off, isn't it, and I'm not that kind. I want a church wedding, but not *too* church."

She had made it clear from the beginning that she thought sex was for after the wedding, and Simon had said, "Oh, absolutely." Jenny was Church of England, and Simon said he was too, though in his case it was a bit nominal. Jenny took him along to her local church for the three Sundays before the wedding, and he fitted in very well there. Most of the young men who went to the church were a bit dull too. Jenny would quite happily have married any of them, if he had happened to have an elderly uncle with Alzheimer's disease and a will already made in his favour.

Jenny's first surprise came on the honeymoon, which was spent in Torquay. Jenny had experimented with sex in her teens and had found that it was something she could take or leave—certainly she had realized that it did not do for her what it apparently did for so many people. In the hotel in Torquay she discovered that her new husband was sexually experienced to an extent, and in ways, she had never dreamt of. They had not been married two days before he was urging her to try things she had never remotely contemplated—had hardly, indeed, heard mentioned.

"But I don't want to. I think that's disgusting."

"Try it."

"I don't want to."

"You can't know what you want till you try it."

And afterwards, when she said bitterly that she had found the experience loathsome, he had said: "Keep on trying. You'll get used to it."

Jenny felt aggrieved. It was so unfair—that someone who was so dull out of bed should not prove to be equally dull in it. Nor had she expected that her wishes, her preferences, should be so completely set aside. She had expected, in fact, to be the dominant partner. By the end of her honeymoon she was participating in bondage rituals.

"Where did you *learn* all this?" she cried dispiritedly. "Where did you learn to *want* this sort of thing?"

"There's a very nice woman in Buxton," Simon said. "I used to go there to visit my uncle. She taught me all I know."

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To be fair, Simon asked her to do all sorts of things to him, as well as wanting to inflict them on her. But when she tried he told her she was about as convincing as an extra in an Australian soap. So she preferred to be the passive recipient rather than the active player. By the end of the honeymoon Jenny had decided that "all that" (as she put it in her own mind) was very silly and unnecessary, but that she could put up with it if necessary. So long as it went no further than it had done.

They had rented as their first home a nice little flat in Fenton. Jenny worked in a hairdresser's, and with both their wages they could afford it, and a car, and an occasional night out. They set to work to redecorate the flat, with their landlord's approval. It would make the place more like theirs, set their stamp on it. Simon's stamp, if he had been allowed his way, would have been very faint indeed, but Jenny had ideas of her own, and Simon let her have her way.

"That's the woman's prerogative," he said, as he also did over such things as food and furniture. The implication, Jenny understood, was that there were other things that were the man's prerogative, and he intended to assert it.

The question of Simon's uncle came up one Saturday, when they were redecorating the bedroom.

"Buying a house will have to wait until Uncle dies," said Simon, slapping paint onto the ceiling. "But of course you know about him, don't you? Mrs. Mackenzie is a friend of your mother's."

So he had known all along! Known—or at least suspected—that she had married him for his expectations. And had gone along with it. Jenny felt her cheeks burn. She was cutting wallpaper with a sharp-edged tool, and she tried to keep her voice calm as she replied: "Shouldn't we go and visit him?"

"What's the point? The poor old bugger doesn't know me—doesn't know Mrs. Mackenzie, doesn't know anybody."

That night Simon really hurt her for the first time. He tugged violently and repeatedly at her hair during lovemaking, though by the end she was screaming for him to stop.

"Don't do that. It hurts like hell," she said afterwards.

"Goes with the territory," said Simon, shrugging.

It was clear to Jennifer now that her plans had gone horribly wrong. What made it worse was the fact that she had no one to discuss things with. Her best friend had been the recipient of her confidences before marriage, and had been very cool since. To confess

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how hideously she had miscalculated would be too humiliating for words. Her mother had never been a confidante, and Jenny shied away from consulting a solicitor. After all, what she wanted to know was whether if she separated from Simon before he inherited, she would forfeit all rights to the old man's lucre when he died. It was not only that she would seem a money-grubber—she could bear that. But it would probably come out and weigh against her should she decide to murder Simon.

She had come to no conclusions on that score. She was pretty sure that if she divorced him once he had become rich she would be entitled to half the conjugal assets. If she—somehow—murdered him and was not charged, she would get the lot. Half with no risk, the lot with considerable risk. On the other hand, with his tastes, murder could easily be made to look like self-defence. He had not yet begun to play nasty games with knives, but the way he fingered with relish the cutting edge of the carving knife at Sunday lunchtime suggested that it was only a matter of time before he did.

She determined to wait, fortified by a letter to Simon from her mother's friend. "It pains me to have to tell you that your uncle appears to be sinking fast."

The only sensible thing to do, Jenny concluded, was to grit her teeth and bear it.

The end of the old gentleman came on a lovely spring morning in late April and was announced in a telephone call from Mrs. Mackenzie, his nurse. They drove up to Buxton, and Simon proved surprisingly adept at making funeral arrangements. "I should be," he said, when they were alone in their room at the Old Hall Hotel. "I've had long enough to prepare for this." They rang around to all the relatives Simon could think of, and thus ensured that there was a respectable gathering in the church and at the cold collation with wine that took place in the old man's substantial stone residence afterwards. Simon's parents did not come. They had always been, in Jenny's view, cold to her—and indeed to Simon himself. Now she decided they resented his inheriting his uncle's money.

Mrs. Mackenzie, whom Jenny had not seen since she was a child, took them to her substantial bosom and said: "It was a merciful end to suffering." But Jenny took care not to catch her eye later during the course of the funeral get-together: she might give her a knowing look, or even a wink, suggesting that she understood her own part in the making of Jenny's marriage to Simon.

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The solicitor, visited next morning, was very encouraging. The will had been made ten years before, when Simon's Uncle Albert was running his own business and sat on the Buxton Council. There was no question he was in sound mind when he made it. In a couple of months or so probate would be declared and the estate would be Simon's absolutely. It would be a very considerable estate, and Simon would be set up comfortably for life. Meanwhile there was nothing to stop Simon putting the house on the market, and if they wanted some money in advance, no doubt his uncle's bank . . .

"Oh no," said Simon, rather to Jenny's disappointment. "We're very quiet people. We can wait."

He rang Mrs. Mackenzie before they left and said that when probate was declared he would be showing his gratitude. He realized that by the time she came to minister to his uncle he was beyond recognising her services. Jenny thought this unnecessary: she had been well paid, and would have no difficulty finding similar work in Buxton. But she did not say so. She was a little uncertain how the access of wealth would affect Simon. In any case he would consider such questions the man's prerogative.

Simon took to wealth, in fact, with modest dash. As soon as they were home he took Jenny to order a Daimler, to take delivery in three months' time. He consulted her studiously as to colour and upholstery, while reserving decisions on mechanical matters to himself. They started to look at good property in the Felton area and the countryside around. Any Old Rectory and substantial Victorian residences that came on the market, they would go along to the estate agent's and get an order to view. Soon they were being sent details of the more expensive properties as they were put up for sale. They had made it clear they wanted something large, or in some other way prestige-building.

"It has to be detached," Simon insisted. "We can't have neighbours overhearing us."

He started dressing well, and encouraged Jenny to open up an account with the most prestigious Derby dress shop. They ate out a lot and Simon got a Diners Club card. They talked a lot about their first really expensive holiday.

"The place I've always fancied is South America," said Simon. "It's one of the last places left in the world with this tang of danger, this tension, this edge. Anything can happen in those countries—they're not safe, stable, cosy places like the rest of the world has become."

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"I don't think I'd fancy it at all," said Jenny, and in the end they booked a holiday at an expensive but unobtrusive hotel in Nice.

Jenny had hoped that having all that money to spend, at least in anticipation, would take the edge off Simon's sexual appetites. It did not. He became more inventive, and seemed to get even greater pleasure from her distress and pain. But still he did not resort to knives, or to any other implements that could be used against him fatally. Jenny didn't know whether to be sorry or relieved. A knife was a two-edged weapon, and the casualty could so easily be herself rather than Simon. She reconciled herself to making do with a half-share.

Simon was informed by the solicitor in Buxton when probate was granted. He didn't ask Jenny whether she wanted to come with him when he went up to deal with various formalities and to complete the sale of his uncle's house. Jenny didn't offer to come either. She was preparing, though only psychologically, for the end of her marriage. A few days after he got back, a week at most, she would dress after one of his horrible sessions and go down to the police station with the marks still on her.

"Go into Ellison and Hanley's and say we'll complete purchase of the Merriton property as soon as I get back from Buxton," Simon said before he drove off.

She wondered whether to bother. Simon would hardly be able to afford it when she left him, with half his property and money under threat. Still, it would embarrass him acutely, going round and cancelling all his expensive near-acquisitions. So she did as she had been told.

He said he thought all the business details would take about three days. When he didn't come then she didn't worry, nor did she try to ring him at his hotel: she wasn't that sort of wife, and it wasn't that sort of marriage. In fact it was five days before she got Simon's postcard, posted second-class from Manchester Airport:

"We're off to Venezuela, and we'll be settling in some exciting, dangerous country with no inconvenient treaties with Great Britain. It was a pleasure torturing you all those months. Did you really think I'd let you get your hands on my money? And you *should* have realized that the woman in Buxton who taught me all I know was Mrs. Mackenzie. Nurses, you know, are connoisseurs of pain."●

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Two of L. F. James's stories appeared in our sister publication, Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, *in the late seventies, and he has been featured more recently in* Hayakawa Magazine. *He joins us now with an unpretentious story about a father's dilemma over a wayward son. . . .*

JEFFREY

by L. F. JAMES

"Jeffrey's coming home."

I put down the newspaper and looked up at my wife as she poured the coffee and dished out the eggs.

"What?"

"He called this morning while you were showering." She sat down heavily in the chair opposite me. "He's quitting school—again." She looked like she was on the verge of tears.

Damn him, I thought. He's my son, and I suppose I love him, but damn him for doing this to her. And to me. This was his third college—did he expect us to find him a fourth? What was wrong with the kid? I looked at my watch.

"He called while I was in the shower? But it's two hours earlier in New Mexico. Why'd he call so early?"

"He was leaving the dorm and starting the drive east. He wanted us to know." She looked up and caught the anger in my eyes.

"Mike," she said pleadingly. "Maybe it's not him this time. There's been some kind of trouble."

"Trouble? What did he say?"

"He was—He was beaten up. A mugging. That's why he's coming back."

I felt some of my anger change to concern. "Is he hurt?"

"He was, but I guess he's all right now. He didn't say much more about it."

"No details, no other explanation?"

"No, except—except he says he loves us."

That wasn't like Jeffrey.

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On the drive to my office in the city, I thought about it. Jeff had been kicked out of his first college, a good New York school, for poor grades. His second, on Long Island, had asked him to leave before he was expelled. We'd had a lot of trouble getting him accepted into his third, and he had to go all the way out to New Mexico. Albuquerque. I'd even let him take his car, paid all his expenses. Where had we gone wrong? We'd given the kid everything.

Maybe that was it, I thought. Maybe we'd given him too much. Maybe, instead of finding him another college now, I should insist that he go out and get a job.

But why in blazes was he quitting this time? He told my wife it was because of a mugging. Hell! Muggings were a lot more common in New York than in New Mexico. He was escaping to the wrong place, if that was his reason. Somehow, it didn't sound right. Why quit school because of a mugging? There were a lot of questions he was going to have to answer when he got home.

I worked distractedly that morning, and by lunchtime I'd cooled down a bit. I'd have a long talk with Jeffrey when he got home, and then I'd give him one last chance. I'd make sure he understood that it *was* his last, too. I had to take a client out to lunch and when I got back to the office, my secretary said there was an urgent message to call home.

My wife answered on the first ring. She was crying.

"Oh, Mike. The police are here. Jeffrey's been . . ." She broke down completely, and I thought I heard a voice in the background. A man got on the phone.

"Mr. Lyle? This is Officer Tagliaferro, Nassau County Police. We got word from the New Mexico Highway Patrol today that your son Jeffrey was killed in an auto accident. We came out to the house to notify the family. I'm afraid your wife has taken it very hard." There was an embarrassed pause. I couldn't find words to fill it. "Ah, will you be coming home soon, sir?"

"Of course."

I broke the national speed limit getting there. The cops, bless 'em, had stayed with my wife, and had even gotten our family doctor's number from her and called him. He had her resting under sedation when I arrived.

"For God's sake, tell me what happened," I begged the cop.

"We don't know much, sir. The New Mexico Highway Patrol found him on a road in the desert early this morning. The body was burned

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beyond recognition, but they made a fairly quick identification thanks to a Medic Alert medallion he was wearing. Then they notified us and asked us to come out to the house."

I sat down hard on the sofa. "What about the other car?"

He looked confused for a moment. "There wasn't one, sir. Your son's car had gone off the road in flames. If there was another vehicle involved, it left the scene before the patrol got there."

It was too much to take in all at once. No wonder my wife was in hysterics. Officer Tagliaferro shifted from one foot to another. "If there's nothing else, sir, we'll be going." He handed me a sheet of paper. "This is the person to contact in New Mexico." I nodded dumbly and took it from him. The house was very quiet when they'd gone.

His Medic Alert medallion. I had asked him always to wear it. Funny how you think of little things at a time like this. His only health problem was that he wore contact lenses, but the Medic Alert Foundation recommended it. I guess he had followed my advice, in this at least. It had made things a little easier, now.

I looked at the paper in my hand, and realized its significance. Jeffrey's body was being held somewhere in New Mexico. I had to call the State Police, a mortician, the airlines—make arrangements to bring it back home. Then there were relatives to notify. I sighed and heaved myself up from my seat. I could feel the tears starting, but I forced them back. Time for that later. I went upstairs to look in on my wife, then went to the telephone in the den.

Somehow we got through the funeral, the encounters with all the well-meaning friends and relatives. We didn't even explain to anyone that Jeff had quit school again. The accident happened close enough to Albuquerque that no one asked any questions. My wife was taking tranquilizers regularly. The doctor said not to worry, she'd be okay after a while. Jeffrey *was* our only child, he pointed out. I almost thought there was disapproval in his voice.

I felt a funny mixture of feelings after it was all over. There was some relief at not having to worry about my son's future any more. There was guilt at feeling that relief. Then there was the frustration, the frustration that began slowly, and built. So many questions I had wanted to ask Jeffrey when I'd heard he was cutting college again, and now I'd never get to ask any of them. I thought about it more and more on the long, solitary drives to and from the city.

Why did a mugging make him quit school and come running home? It wasn't like him, despite all his other faults. Was there

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more to it? I wondered. "I love you," he had told my wife. Had he just been trying to get on our good side before arriving home again in disgrace? Was he truly sorry for hurting us? Did he somehow have a premonition of his death? I couldn't accept that—then another ugly thought struck me. Had he feared he was going to be *killed* by someone? Was his death somehow connected to the mugging he'd told his mother about? I tried to push the thought out of my mind, but it wouldn't go away. I was more and more troubled by the idea, and yet I couldn't discuss it with anyone I knew—surely not with my wife, for fear of upsetting her even more. Finally I had to do something.

I called the police in Albuquerque. I contacted his campus security force.

Our son had never reported being mugged.

I didn't know what that meant—probably nothing, but I arranged for some time off at work and told my wife I had business out West. I landed in Albuquerque the next afternoon.

I rented a car and drove straight to the University. It wasn't hard to get in to speak to the Dean of Students, but I could barely keep my temper when it became apparent he didn't know much about the students he was supposed to be in charge of.

He got out Jeffrey's record and verified some facts. Yes, Jeff had quit school, giving "personal problems" as the reason. No, the dean hadn't spoken to him personally. No, he hadn't heard anything about a mugging. I got the address of my son's dorm, and the names of some of his professors. The dean looked a bit embarrassed when I left without shaking hands.

His professors knew even less about my son than the dean, but they were able to tell me that Jeff hadn't been doing very well in his studies. That didn't surprise me. One of them ventured apologetically, "He probably had a lot of outside interests." That was as personal as any of them got.

At Jeffrey's dorm, I spoke to his roommate, and got my first surprise. Jeffrey hadn't lived there since several months before his death.

"He moved into an apartment with a friend of his," the boy told me. "I don't know the guy personally, but I can give you his address."

I asked if he knew about the mugging.

"I don't really know the details," he told me. "It was a robbery attempt, from what I heard. I saw Jeff on campus the afternoon before . . ."

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"Before he died," I said.

"Yes, and his face was badly bruised. He didn't want to say much about it." The kid looked miserable. "We weren't all that good friends."

"No," I said. No, this boy didn't look like Jeffrey's kind. My son had always preferred a somewhat more exciting circle of pals. I thanked him and left.

I wondered what it was I really hoped to find. I had to admit I didn't know, but as I located my son's apartment house on the map of the city Avis had given me, I felt somewhat nervous about what I was doing.

The place was in what looked like the seedier section of town, which didn't surprise me, given the finances of most college students. I found the apartment and rang the bell. There was no answer, but I could hear music inside, and a pungent smell that I figured was marijuana hung in the hallway. I knocked hard on the door and waited some more. Finally it was opened a crack, and a long-haired kid looked out.

"I'm Jeff Lyle's father," I said quickly, before he could take me for a cop or something. "I'd like to speak with you for a moment."

His jaw went slack, or slacker than it had been. "Heavy," he said. He hesitated a moment, then opened the door.

I walked into the living room—at least, I guess that's what it was—and looked around. A stereo was blaring, and the pungent smoke was even thicker in here. I spotted a postal scale and several boxes of plastic sandwich bags on a desk in the corner. I felt myself losing control.

"What did you want?" the kid asked me.

I turned to face him. "I just wanted to find out something about Jeffrey, about why he was coming home from school when—when the accident happened. Did he live here?"

"Yeah."

I tried to smile. "It's just very hard for my wife and me to understand everything. It all happened, you know, so fast." The kid kept quiet.

"Look," I said, "I don't care about the marijuana or anything, but—did my son use it?"

"I guess so."

"Was—He wasn't involved in dealing or anything, was he?" I gestured toward the paraphernalia on the desk.

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"Look, man." The kid seemed to wake up. "What's it to you? He's dead—just leave it alone."

I had the urge to punch him, but I stifled it. "I'm just trying to understand."

"You can't understand, and what's the difference, anyway?"

I tried another approach. "They say he was mugged. Do you know anything about that?"

The boy shrugged. "An accident. The doorbell rang, he answered it, some big guys came in and beat him up. It must've been a mistake. Maybe they were looking for someone else."

I couldn't hide my anger any longer. "Like you, for instance?"

He walked to the door and opened it. I wanted to ask him more, but I left before I lost control.

On the street, I drove around for a while, then made a decision and found the police station. They couldn't help me, they said. They knew nothing about the so-called mugging, and the accident had come under the jurisdiction of the highway patrol.

I told the cop what I had seen at Jeff's old apartment, and he loosened up somewhat.

"Look, Mr. Lyle, I'm really sorry about your son's death. There's a possibility he was dealing drugs—not just marijuana—and at one time we did have that apartment under surveillance. But right now, we're not that interested in it. There are bigger fish to catch than those college kids."

"Are you implying that this kid—and my son—may have had links with professional criminals?" I felt foolish after I said it.

The officer looked sympathetic. "What else?" He shrugged. "You read the papers, you must know what goes on. We've had information there's been trouble lately between organized crime and the college kids they use as dealers around here. They're all going to play right into our hands, eventually." He moved some papers on his desk, and I could tell he wanted me to leave. I thanked him halfheartedly for his time and got out of there.

I sat in my car in the parking lot. My worst suspicions about my son had been confirmed. A user and a dealer most likely. I sighed. I should have left well enough alone.

The "mugging" was probably a gangland beating. But it had scared my son, at least. He had had the sense to get out of here and head for home. If he had made it home, maybe I could have helped him straighten out. I felt so helpless, so empty, thinking about it. I hoped to hell his death had been accidental, not the gangsters follow-

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ing through. I didn't see what I could do to find out, anyway. I made a fist and pounded the steering wheel. It was all so damn frustrating, so unsatisfying. I wanted to go back in time somehow, back before Jeffrey's accident. To talk to him, help him. I started the car and began to drive.

I wound up in a restaurant and picked at a steak. I had more than a few drinks. Noticing how dark it was outside, I paid my check and left. I drove aimlessly for a while, and then found myself back in the neighborhood of Jeff's apartment. I parked across the street and sat there, feeling stupid. I didn't know what I expected to accomplish, but at least I could let the drinks wear off.

A movement at the front door caught my eye, and I looked more closely.

Jeffrey came down the steps carrying a suitcase and started up the street.

Oh, he looked a lot different, of course. His hair was very short, and he had a full beard and mustache. His clothes looked unfamiliar, and he was wearing eyeglasses, something he had always hated to do. But it was Jeffrey. His mother would have recognized him, and so did I.

It all made sense. The badly burned body (Whose?). The Medic Alert emblem. The "mugging." The "I love you."

Jeffrey was going underground.

I thought about my wife back on Long Island, mourning her only son. I reached for the ignition key, ready to follow and confront him.

I paused, remembering what that cop had said about organized crime. Those gangsters could be watching me now, just as I had been watching the apartment. They could follow me and I'd lead them right to Jeffrey.

I sat back. I'd have to go to the police. It was the only solution.

But then I thought about that body, charred beyond recognition, in the coffin I had bought and buried in a Long Island cemetery. I thought about my son walking up this Albuquerque street. I was suddenly afraid to go to the police.

And then I remembered my decision—it seemed so long ago—to give Jeffrey one last chance.

I drove my rented car back to the airport and waited for the next flight east.

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Malcolm McClintick's first story for EQMM *appeared in 1979, followed by two more in the 1980s. Since then he has authored several novels, including* Joe Nix is Dead *(Doubleday, 1990). We're glad to have him back with this thought-provoking story. . . .*

YOUR WORD AGAINST MINE

by MALCOLM McCLINTICK

There was a little twenty-four-hour coffee shop a block north of my downtown office building. At ten o'clock on a Tuesday night it was a depressing place, with only a handful of customers—a young kid in jeans, wrinkled shirt, ratty sneakers; a couple of plump women eating waffles; a big guy who needed a shave and a haircut.

I never ate here, so nobody knew me, no waitresses or cooks or regular customers. As a further precaution I was in a mild disguise consisting of tinted glasses, sweatshirt, faded corduroys, ragged sneakers I hardly ever wore, and an Indianapolis Colts baseball cap pulled low over my eyes. The casual observer would never recognize me as Jack Jamison, sales manager of Norton Electronics. Even so, I was nervous.

At a quarter past ten I paid for my coffee and left. My car might be recognized so I'd taken a bus instead. The late March air was chilly; zipping my sweatshirt all the way up, I started along the sidewalk towards the office, squinting at the glare of passing headlights. Even at this hour there was a lot of traffic up and down Meridian Street.

I watched for cops but of course I hadn't done anything, yet. One cruised past, ignoring me—in my getup, I was just another late-night downtown pedestrian, a fry cook on his way home, a bar hopper, maybe a cab driver taking a break.

The office, a squat two-story brick building, was eerily quiet and dark. My key would fit the main entrance or the shipping doors in the back alley. The alley was safer; a cop might question someone entering Norton Electronics Sales and Service at 10:15 P.M., but in

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the alley no cop would see. I wandered back through the parking lot, looked left and right, ducked into the alley's blackness, and hurried to the shipping doors, removing the tinted glasses so I could see.

No one—no cars, no people, nothing. Just green garbage dumpsters and a skinny cat that stared at me briefly, then beat it fast and soundlessly. I used the key, and was in.

The dark halls were creepy with only the tiny narrow beam of a penlight to show me the way to the company president's office off the front lobby, where only this morning he'd locked five thousand dollars in one of his desk drawers as the company bonus fund, intending to pay out the traditional annual cash bonuses to each of his twenty-five or so employees tomorrow.

I was having mine tonight. The whole five grand. It would keep the loan sharks at bay, pay off some gambling debts, prevent my car from being repossessed.

Everything loomed darkly around me like tombstones. I was sweating, and shaking with nervous chills. This is a crime, I kept telling myself. This is larceny. I could go to jail.

But I really needed the cash.

Funny. Cummings, the treasurer, had begged Mr. Norton not to leave so much money in his desk, urging him to at least use the company safe, but Norton had shrugged him off. "My desk is just as good as that safe. And if I can't trust my own employees, who *can* I trust?"

Not me, I thought wryly. Not me.

Time to quit stalling and just do it.

I entered Norton's office off the spacious lobby and reception area, went over to his desk, and took a second key from my pocket. It was a duplicate I'd made months ago, after discovering Norton's keys lying out in the open on his desk one day when everyone else had gone to lunch. He did it habitually, trusting everybody. "This company is my family," he'd say. "You've got to trust your family."

I'd thought a key to the boss's desk might come in handy sometime or other and had it duplicated at a shop two blocks away and back on his desk before lunch ended.

My hand shook so much I could hardly get the key inserted, and for a moment I panicked, wondering if Norton had changed the lock—but then the key slid in and I turned it and pulled open the drawer.

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And there it was, five thousand bucks in five bricks of twenty-dollar bills, fifty bills to a brick, fresh from the bank with the paper bands still around them, each band indicating a total of a thousand dollars. I reached inside the drawer and began shoving the banded bundles down the front of my sweatshirt, which was large and bulky but tied snugly around my waist with a drawstring.

A noise from the lobby made me jerk my head around, and lights came on out there, brighter than sunshine in the half-open doorway.

My heart broke into a drum roll. A few seconds later heels tap-tapped towards the office door and someone entered and hit the overhead lights, almost blinding me. At almost the same instant, I caught a whiff of a strong familiar perfume.

Only one person in the company wore that scent.

I stood blinking at Penny Orlando, Bill Norton's new young secretary. About the last person in the world I wanted to see right then.

For one thing, she was a company employee. For another, she had a reputation for complete honesty. For a third, I'd recently had a very unfortunate date with her, in the course of which I'd made certain advances which she'd interpreted as a kind of physical assault, and I figured she was just waiting for the opportunity to somehow get back at me.

And here was her opportunity.

She stared wide-eyed, her lips slightly apart.

Then her gaze went to the open drawer and to the wad of bills I clutched in one hand as I stood motionless, frozen like a kid playing statues.

"Jack? What in the world . . . what're you doing?"

"Nothing," I said.

"You look so . . . strange." Her dark eyes flickered. "In that get-up, I mean. And, isn't that . . . Mr. Norton's bonus money?"

I had three options. Number one I eliminated right away—I'm no murderer. Number two, lie, make up something, anything. But my mind was a terrible blank. Number three, brazen it out.

She's the only witness, I thought suddenly. A lowly secretary. And I'm the company's sales manager. Who're they going to believe? Her, or me?

I stuffed the last bundle of twenties inside my sweatshirt, zipped it up again, slammed Norton's desk drawer shut, relocked it with my duplicate key, and frowned at Penny.

"You didn't see a thing," I told her.

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Her face was red, flushed, and her lower lip trembled a bit. So young and innocent. And so self-righteous. Just like on our date.

"But, you can't take that. Jack? You can't just *take* that. . . ."

"I was never here, Penny. You never saw me." I paused. "What're you doing here, anyway? At this time of night?"

"I forgot some letters I have to mail by midnight."

Probably she was telling the truth. Penny Orlando was one of those people who *always* tell the truth. Reliable. Conscientious. That kind of person.

"You're not really taking that, are you?"

"I sure am."

"Jack, if you do . . . I'll call the police."

"So what? Go ahead. Who'll believe you? It'll be just your word against mine."

She stared at me with huge dark eyes like a puppy's, the way my mom's eyes used to get when she'd catch me trying to set fire to my report card. Like she just couldn't believe it.

Brushing past her, I beat it back down the corridor to the shipping entrance, went out, locked the door, and started down the dark alley, cinders crunching under my sneakers, wondering how long it'd take Penny Orlando to call the police, or Mr. Norton, or both.

And that's when I began to think.

Supposing Penny *did* call the cops? Or, more likely, suppose she telephoned Bill Norton? I visualized the Indianapolis police pounding on my door with a warrant to search for five thousand in cash.

Handcuffs. Miranda rights. A phone call to a lawyer. Jail. Trial. Prison.

Penny could be calling the cops already. If I was stopped now, it was all over.

But if they didn't find any money . . .

A plan formed gradually, slowly. I pictured Penny Orlando talking to Norton, spilling her guts to him, describing how she'd been in the office late tonight and seen me taking the bonus money. I visualized Norton thinking it over. If he believed her—and she was *his* secretary—I was in hot water. If he didn't believe her, then it would start to look very bad for young Penny. If I didn't take the cash, the only other person who could've was Penny.

I knew a way to point Norton along in that direction.

I gave Penny Orlando a few extra minutes to pick up the letters she had to mail, then went back to the shipping doors and slipped inside the building. It was dark and quiet. Carefully, not even using

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my penlight, I tiptoed along the hall to the front, as quiet and edgy as a cat.

Penny wore tons of the perfume I'd smelled. I think she bathed in it. And I'd heard she kept a few extra gallons of it in her desk, in the secretaries' area just outside Norton's office. Her desk wasn't locked either. Indianapolis is a small town and Norton Electronics was a small company, and we were, as Norton said, family.

The perfume was there.

I took the cap off the bottle and sprinkled a drop or two onto the paper bands holding each brick of bills, not much, but quite enough to allow anyone to smell it.

Next, I took the duplicate key to Norton's desk and looked for a place in Penny's desk to hide it, settling eventually on a small box of paper clips, rubber bands, and one of those big pink erasers. Perfect.

It was still silent as the grave. Every once in a while I thought I heard a noise, but dark old buildings, like houses, make sounds in the night, and I gritted my teeth and moved down the hall to my own office.

Opening my lower left drawer (my desk was old and battered and the lock didn't work), I hid one bundle of twenties under some computer paper. There was a wadded-up brown paper bag in my trash can, tossed there by me earlier in the evening while working late, just after the janitor had made his 5:30 rounds. It was one of those bags I brought sandwiches in, because I liked having lunch alone in my office.

I pulled it from the can, opened it, and shoved the rest of Norton's bonus money inside it, then wadded it up and replaced it in the trash can. The theory was this: nobody expects to find anything hidden in the trash. They'll search your clothes and your desk and maybe your briefcase if you have one, but not your trash can.

If Norton believed Penny and insisted on looking in my office, he'd find part of his stolen money planted in my desk drawer, reeking of Penny's perfume.

If by some weird chance he checked my trash anyway, the same smell would be on that money as well.

And if he skipped the trash, then I'd be four thousand dollars richer, with Penny Orlando taking the rap for the theft.

I thought, *I've got you now, dear,* and made my way in the darkness to the shipping doors for the second time that night, feeling lucky.

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Leaving by the rear again, I went the length of the alley and walked six blocks to get out of the immediate area, then hopped a bus for home.

The worst part of going to work the next morning wasn't being tired or nervous or dreading the announcement that Mr. Norton's bonus money was missing, or forcing myself not to open my lower left desk drawer or look in my trash can (in case someone barged in and caught me doing it and later remembered), though all of those were factors; the worst thing was meeting the large round staring puppy-dog eyes of Penny Orlando. For two hours I managed to avoid them, but at a quarter to eleven my luck ran out: the company president buzzed my phone and called me into his office.

Bill Norton paced restlessly behind his desk, looking dour, and off to one side on a leather sofa sat little Penny Orlando, watching me. I caught another whiff of her perfume.

So she really did it, I thought, feeling my face go hot. The little goody-two-shoes really cried "thief."

"Jack, we've got a big problem here." My boss sounded hesitant. He was looking around, everywhere but at me, obviously embarrassed.

"Really?" I tried to act innocent, and surprised. "Uh, what's going on?" It took a supreme effort to avoid glancing down at Norton's desk drawer.

Penny and Norton exchanged a quick glance, then the boss asked gruffly, "Jack, do you have a key to my desk?"

"Your desk? No. Why?"

"Were you here in the building last night? Say, around 10:30?"

I stared at him. "Me? Here? Last night?"

"That's right. You. Here. Last night."

"No, of course not. Why?"

"Where were you, exactly?"

"I was at home." How would an innocent man act? A little annoyed, maybe? I tried annoyed. "What is this, anyway, Bill? What's going on here?"

Bill Norton finally looked directly at me, his big face red. "Jack, somebody came in here last night, opened my desk drawer, and removed all the bonus money. All five thousand dollars of it." Suddenly he took a step towards me and balled his fists. He was pushing sixty but he could intimidate younger men if he wanted to. His voice grew louder. "Penny was here. She says she saw you do it." He

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gestured towards the girl. "She says she caught you with my desk drawer open and the money in your hand."

I forced myself to meet Penny's gaze for a moment, a long and painful moment. She was giving me that hurt, puzzled, accusing look. Slowly, I shrugged and shook my head at Norton.

"Sorry. I don't know what she's trying to pull here, but she's wrong. I couldn't unlock your desk drawer if I wanted to. And besides, I wasn't here. And, more to the point . . ." I paused for effect, then concluded, "I'm not a thief."

"Can you prove you weren't here, Jack?"

"I don't *have* to prove I wasn't here." I started sounding indignant. "All you've got is this girl's accusation. She's probably got some kind of a grudge against me. Or maybe she's nuts. Who knows?"

Penny gasped and jumped up from the sofa so fast her dark hair bounced around her shoulders. "You're lying and you *know* it, Mr. Jamison. I *saw* you!"

Ignoring her, I gave Norton my most sincere expression. "Look, Bill, you know darn well Penny's had it in for me ever since that date we had. She—"

Norton's face got redder and he stopped me with a frown, then said, "Would you excuse us for a few minutes, Penny? I'd like a word with Jack alone."

Penny didn't much like it, but she reluctantly left Norton's office and closed the door. I saw sweat on Norton's big brow.

"What's this all about, Jack?"

"You already know, Bill. I took her out. Made a few passes. She seemed to think I was trying to assault her or something. I mean, I got her a little drunk, and, yeah, I tried a few things. Okay, I admit it, it was a pretty rotten thing to do, okay? But nothing really happened, and she's trying to send me to *jail* for it—man, that's *revenge!*"

Norton's jaw worked. He turned his back to gaze out through his venetian blinds at the late morning traffic on Meridian Street for a while, then looked back at me again, as stern as a judge about to sentence a killer to death.

"Jack, I'll lay it on the line. I believe in Penny. She's my secretary. She's family. I trust her. But you're family, too, and I can't believe you'd steal from me, either. I think there's an easy way to settle this." Norton's eyes narrowed. "I think we'd better have a look in your office."

Good, I thought. Exactly as planned. I remembered to look pained.

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"*My* office? What the hell for?"

"If you really took that money, I don't imagine you were stupid enough to leave the building with it after Penny saw you. A call to the police, and they'd have you cold. So if you took it, and I'm not saying you did, son, but if you did, then probably you stashed it somewhere. Most likely, in your office."

"Let's have some police here now," I said, trying to sound hurt and angry. "If you're going to accuse me of stealing from you—"

"Either you took it or Penny did," Norton snapped, losing patience with me. "All I'm saying is, let's check your office. If it's not there, we can decide where to go next with this thing."

We had a few more words and went out and down the hall to my office, various employees gawking at us from half-opened doors, whispers hissing up and down the corridor.

"This your desk, son?" Norton asked, pointing, and I resisted the automatic sarcastic reply.

"Yes."

"Let's have a look in those drawers, okay?"

"I didn't take the damn money, Bill. Go ahead and look." I glowered briefly at Norton, who looked embarrassed but stubbornly proceeded to search my desk. It seemed to take him forever to reach that bottom left drawer and pull it open, but he finally did.

The money wasn't there.

The lower left drawer held only my computer paper. No perfumed wad of twenties.

My mind raced. What the hell had happened? Had somebody found it and stolen it? Were there other thieves in the company besides me? Another employee going through my stuff before I got to work? How was I going to frame Penny Orlando now?

"Nothing here," Bill Norton said, and I couldn't even look relieved. I was starting to sweat.

"What's that in your trash can, Jack?" He peered into the green metal can at the wadded-up paper bag.

"Nothing," I told him. Something was wrong, really wrong. I couldn't think. "An old lunch sack."

"Let's see." Norton reached in, pulled out the paper bag, opened it, rummaged around inside while I held my breath and waited for him to pull out the balance of the money I'd stolen.

His big hand came out, but not clutching wads of bills wrapped in paper bands. His thumb and forefinger held a small metal key.

"This looks like the key to my desk," Norton said.

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My heart started pounding so hard I thought I was having a coronary. It actually hurt. It hit me then—somehow, in some horrible way, I was being framed. If I hadn't been so scared it would've been funny. Somebody was framing me for doing what I'd actually done.

Penny, I thought. But how?

She must've still been in the building last night when I returned. Must've hidden in the dark and heard me rummaging in her desk, heard me in my office. She must've waited for me to leave again, then found the key where I'd planted it in her desk drawer and the wad of bills in my own desk and the remainder of the cash in my trash can. The innocent little Penny Orlando. I started hating her all over again.

Norton was poking around again, looking behind my venetian blinds and under my desk. "Why don't you come clean, son?" he asked, sounding like my father, somebody's father. "Get it out in the open. It's best to admit these things. Where'd you hide it, Jack?"

Then he started gazing up at the ceiling, which was one of those dirty off-white things constructed of one-foot squares of acoustical tile supported by a grid of thin metal frames. The heat and air-conditioning vent was just over my desk.

"One of those tiles looks uneven," Norton said, tilting his big head up to gaze at it.

The square tile right next to the vent wasn't properly seated on its metal frame, but rested crookedly, as though recently removed and not properly replaced.

My stomach started to churn.

Norton sat on the edge of my desk, swung his feet around and up, and, grunting with the effort, managed to get to a standing position. Reaching up with one hand, he pushed the ceiling tile up. His hand disappeared into the open space over the tiles where the ducts ran, fumbled around, stopped. "Got something." His hand came out of the square hole gripping a large manilla envelope bulging with something.

He jumped down. Pulled the little metal clasp up, opened the flap, and shook the envelope's contents out onto my desk.

Bundles of twenty-dollar bills. Watching him count it, I thought I might pass out.

"It's all there," Norton said gruffly. Sadly. "Five thousand dollars." He looked at me. I saw pain in his eyes. "I think you'd better

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have a seat, Jack, while I call the police." He hesitated. "You want a lawyer?"

I couldn't speak. Shaking my head, I sank into my swivel chair as he left my office. For a long time I just sat there in a daze, trying to figure out how it could have happened, thinking about jail and handcuffs and trials and prison. Public humiliation. Cells. Pain.

I was considering suicide.

Then somebody knocked and I sat up straight and cleared my throat. "Come in."

It was Penny Orlando, her wide dark eyes watching me smugly.

"Here. I thought you might like to have these." She tossed a pair of tinted glasses onto my desk. The glasses I'd worn as part of my disguise—I must've dropped them somewhere last night while taking the money. And she'd found them. . . .

I looked at her. "You stayed here last night. You found the key and the money. You set me up." My voice sounded hoarse. "You won't get away with it, Penny. I'll tell Norton. I'll tell *everybody*. . . ."

She shook her head and said softly, "Go ahead, Jack. It'll be just your word against mine. . . ."

And then the cops came in.

DETECTIVERSE

WHO WAS THAT MASKED MAN
AND HOW DID HE GET AWAY WITH IT?

by SEYMOUR KAPETANSKY

Why did they call the Ranger "Lone"
When he was never on his own?
Could he the Rule of Law enforce
Without stout Silver, his great horse?
Could he track down those outlaws pronto
Without his Indian side-kick Tonto?
And since his work produced no pay,
Who was it paid his bills each day?
WHY DID THEY CALL THE RANGER "LONE"
WHEN HE WAS NEVER ON HIS OWN?

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What constitutes a crime? In the widest sense, according to Random House, "any offense, serious wrong-doing, or sin"—including, then, those not perceived by the world at large, to be detected only by the conscience of the perpetrator. . . .

THE DISINTEGRATING MAN

by LEA CASH-DOMINGO

I circulate among art enthusiasts admiring Brandon McCabe's final exhibit. Professionals and politicians smile, chat, and nod, do all the things people do who know everything about art except how to enjoy it. They move around McCabe's creations, puzzle over the artist's intent, say it's the best he's ever done. I know it's not. I view this melee of Matisse-like sculptures blemished by cabbage-sized eruptions on the front torsos as depressing.

A fellow critic shakes my hand. We are among the few who know that I am the man responsible for McCabe's success. Although McCabe often did not bother to show for his own exhibits, or if he bothered, did so thoroughly drunk, I earned him a reputation.

I pass from cluster to cluster. Out of the corner of my eye I catch sight of Leona McCabe, dressed in black. Her expression is animated as she talks about a reclining bronze woman to a couple whose attentive manner marks them as prospective buyers. I slip through the crowd, hoping she doesn't see me, so I won't have to explain why in McCabe's last months of life I avoided him.

On the sidewalk Wendy Jones, one of McCabe's contemporaries, thwarts my escape. She points an accusing finger at me, bares her teeth. "You had to kill him, didn't you?"

"Whatever do you mean?" I blurt out.

She looks exultant or contemptuous, I can't tell which. "You may as well have pulled the trigger yourself."

A memory of McCabe's studio seeps into my mind. A once meticulously clean room houses a bloodbath of half-finished statues and abandoned metallic sculptures, all twisted images.

"How could you pretend you were his friend?" she demands.

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I run to hail a taxi. As brownstones blur together in a rainy streak of porch lights, I shut my mind on Wendy Jones's accusation and think instead about the feature-length essay the *Times* has asked me to write about McCabe's career. What will I write? I stare out the window . . .

The pub lights sparkled brightly, insinuating a constant glare from the mirrors that lined the walls. Brandon threw his head back, chugged down warm beer, and poured himself a fourth glass.

"We'll get out of this stinking hell hole yet!" he yelled above the din.

"Keep your voice down. Do you want everyone to hear?"

"Neil, Neil, Neil." He attempted to smooth back his coarse wavy red hair but it sprang forward like an untamed beast. "The world's been shouting at us all our lives. It's time we started shouting back."

It's hard to believe we grew up in the same squalor. There are ironies, though. People thought I would become the artist and McCabe the writer. If it were not for my father's desertion of my mother and myself, I probably would have gone as promised to art school, and if it were not for the fatal shooting of McCabe's father by his mother, perhaps McCabe would have become a critic. But my mother pushed me out into the world when I was eighteen, and except for an uncle who worked as an editor I might have waited tables and scrubbed floors.

Art critics before me claimed the breakdown that followed his mother's prison sentence built character and that the four-year stay in a psychiatric hospital transformed him from a cynic to a tragic romantic. I'm not sure about his being either a cynic or a romantic. I'd have to say that with an alcoholic father who beat his mother and a mother who tolerated a broken jaw and crushed fingers, his life prepared him for despair.

I pay the taxi and walk up the flight of stairs into the hall of my West End apartment overlooking Riverside Park. A flick of the switch throws a bath of light onto the living room furniture. I turn off the lights and find my way in the dark to my study, where I turn on the computer.

In the screen I see a faint elusive image of myself. I reach out to touch the image and as my forefinger makes contact, the reflected hand becomes distorted, reminding me of a fat man in a carnival mirror.

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* * *

The phonograph bleated out raucous band music. The lazy afternoon stole beneath the drapes, and fingers of light reached for the far wall. Between us on the oak table was the chessboard and the pawns and royalty with their problematic power plays.

"Don't take it so seriously," Brandon said, chewing a toothpick. "Matt Barnes is a third-rate critic and a first-rate ass."

We were talking about a rival critic who had summed up my first exhibit of mood paintings by saying I was a gadfly who, in producing a minor achievement, had proven a major disappointment.

I took Brandon's words with a shot of brandy. I drank shot after shot to numb the realization that I was still an unknown.

Evening shadows stretched into oblivion. Spite made me go after Brandon's king. "Checkmate," I said as I positioned my knight.

"You critics," he replied, laughing. "You'll get us all."

A downpour threatens to obscure the neighbor's garden. Wendy Jones's voice jabs at me. Her insinuation is clear enough. Like a caged tiger, I mentally search the years, backward and forward, for consolation. I seize upon the January when McCabe was discharged from Bellevue.

It was a bleak, hapless month. Slushy snow made walking hazardous. Lines stretched from the soup kitchens at St. Mark's Place. My wife and I set McCabe up in a Soho loft, bought his supplies, fed him, encouraged him. I used what little influence I had to get him shows, and then I wrote about them.

I mentally challenge Jones's accusation. I'm no murderer, I was McCabe's protector.

I fall into uneasy sleep in the chair, my chin on my chest. Sometime in the night I startle into wakefulness. Perhaps it's the chill. At forty-nine, the chill affects my arthritic shoulders more than jogging.

I make a file for McCabe's essay and stare, still drowsy with sleep, at the blinking dash waiting for inspiration to direct its movement across the screen. No creativity comes, only jealous memories.

Brandon stared at the floor between our feet. A figure moved toward us and sensing it, Brandon retreated, hiding behind one of his creations, a winged copper creature. They danced a tête-à-tête of pursuit and retreat, the figure finally cornering McCabe beneath his rendition of an angered Moses.

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"The curator for the Museum of Modern Art," McCabe told me later that evening, "wants me to create a series on technology. What do you think?"

"Go for it. It's visibility for your work."

"But is it what I'm really after?"

I looked incredulously at my pensive friend, distinguished by a red moustache and an anemic complexion, who seemed to shy away from even my eye contact as though to look into another's eyes was to see too much. "Of course this is what you're after," I barked. "Do you honestly want to go on taking assignments to touch up photographs just so you and Leona can live hand to mouth?"

"I'm not talking about survival, Neil. What about values?"

"What about them?"

"My audience might find the subject matter objectionable."

"You mean, your political audience. What about the professional man? Shouldn't he be able to enjoy what you, as no one else, can show him?"

"You don't think it will compromise my integrity?"

We all compromise.

I stare at the computer screen. I see myself, years younger, trying to blot out the all-too-fresh sting of my own failure. I remember thinking that I was about to forge historical greatness in him, a small consolation for my own furtive attempts at recognition.

Insomnia prevents me from any real sleep. In darkness I pace, make breakfast, eat, and pace some more. I clutch McCabe's suicide note, given to me by the police, which in part blames me for pushing him to accept the museum commission.

Why blame me? I didn't force him to do anything.

I light the gas burner and incinerate the note. I did everything I could for McCabe.

The three of us kibbitzed over espressos about Brandon's emergence as a "satirical" artist. He and Leona were living in a modest place on the East River with an old greenhouse converted to a studio in an overgrown tangle of a backyard. I got a kick out of a resident statue in the living room of former-President Carter made of melted copper pennies with a giant sculpted plastic peanut immersed in the center.

Leona, a frenetic block of energy who I feared might come between me and Brandon, led me to the studio to show me the commissioned

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series, already begun. At the time, the first piece was little more than a lattice mount and foot-high nail on which rested the barest fragile shell of the world.

"This is the beginning of a whole new life for you two," I said. "He'll get his due now; I'll make sure of it."

"Well, you know how it is with Brandy," Leona said bitterly. "It's visibility, not money."

"Don't be too sure about that. I know better than you the poverty he came from. Believe me, he's afraid to go back."

"Maybe it's you who is afraid to go back."

"You've never wanted him to be successful."

She glowered. "Isn't it time you remarried, or something?"

"I don't need someone who'll stifle my creativity," I countered.

"What do you know about creating? Your pieces are manufactured."

The new day invades my windows. Her rebuke still stings. The clock reads seven-twenty. There's ample time for a jog before I take the subway downtown to critique the Moira Step exhibit. I put on flannel sweats and tennis shoes and cast myself into the cold but bright, stark morning. The pavement is wet and my mind says, be careful. But I take flight, holding my arms to my chest as though to restrain the pain in my shoulders. Today nothing inhibits it. I run faster, as if somehow to outrun myself.

We washed the gin down with tonic chasers. Brandon and Leona talked of radicals who had climbed a fence and raided a military base where the government stored plutonium. The group was getting a shabby deal from the D.A., who wanted to put them away for ten to twenty years. Brandon raved about the government taking away people's rights by locking them up. The intensity of his speech made me edgy and the first chance I got, I asked how the museum series was progressing.

Perhaps sensing my discomfort, or looking for a momentary escape himself, Brandon took me into his greenhouse and showed me the completed projects. The six-foot-high globe of wrought iron was completed, the continents covered with real stamps. I looked the other pieces over quickly. One was a wall-sized piece of black metal with a nuclear power plant on a raised horizon and lines etched to form roads going in a hundred different directions, leading nowhere. Another was a disintegrating man pieced together with bones,

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twigs, and metal, with a rocket-pack made of soda cans on its back.

I tried not to show disappointment. The collective work before me showed little of the creativity that characterized his earlier works. In those early days, before two failed marriages and his life with Leona, he sculpted heads without orifices, trees with human ears and mouths, and mystic creatures whose eyes peered through buildings.

"Maybe mainstream America will see how tenuous the world is," he said. "Or what direction we are all headed in."

I walked around the studio, studying each of the five pieces, trying, but not quite succeeding, to view them as artistic. "How much are you planning on asking?"

He hesitated. "I realize the museum has considerable funds and can afford a higher price, but I don't know. I think it's important to charge a fair fee, no matter who the buyer."

I considered him a bloody fool.

I run faster. The morning air tears at my lungs.

How well does anyone see into another man's soul? As I head back to my apartment and pore over endless hours of conversation, I'm struck by the realization that the man I thought McCabe was is not the man whose life I will finally summarize.

I missed something—I knew him, but didn't know him. Even as I retrace a handful of visits, try to recollect exactly what was said, the way we said it, my mind gets snagged on an April afternoon two years ago. That was the day I covered the exhibit of Wendy Jones, whose paintings were like empty comic-strip versions of art where one could virtually see the empty balloons coming out of the heads.

The McCabes had moved. I took several wrong turns and nearly didn't find it. Their new home was a definite improvement: a brownstone with a deck, and floor-to-ceiling windows looking out at the Manhattan skyline from Brooklyn Heights. Getting around was difficult for Leona who was seven-months pregnant.

"Brandy!" she yelled. "It's Neil."

Minutes later Brandon came into the living room, wiping his paint-stained hands on his overalls. He looked out of place, as though somehow his energy had diminished and no longer filled up the man he used to be. He laid a hand on my shoulder, said it was good to see a familiar face. (Was it good? Or was he using shorthand and I deciphered incorrectly?) He was into what he called his

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Birdman motif. These were sculptures of short stubby men with beaks for noses and wings for arms, whose iron bodies were covered with feathers.

"I never thought I'd see you in a place like this," I said. "So tell me: whatever happened to the museum pieces?"

He lit a pipe and didn't respond for half a minute. Then he said in a disquieting tone that the way it turned out had made him a different man. He had asked for eight thousand dollars and walked away with thirty.

I can still hear my shrieks of laughter, my voice rising giddily above his. I was happy for him. I can almost see him, with pieces of metal stuck to his clothes like a second skin, nudging me outside onto the deck beyond earshot of his wife.

He hugged me to him, an almost desperate gesture that reminded me too sharply of my father saying goodbye.

"What is it?" I asked, momentarily alarmed.

"Can't you guess?"

I shook my head. "You've got it all. You're known, you're a success, you're well off."

"That's where you're wrong," he replied with surprisingly little joy. "There's not enough time to walk around with the ideas. They're all locked out."

"Don't be absurd. You're just going through a phase. Every artist gets blocked now and again. It's a sign of growth."

He steered me by the elbow to the edge of the deck, where we gazed at the sun as it set behind an uneven skyline.

"Every artist dreams," he said, as brilliant orange inflamed the sky. "At least the ones that create do."

Now my mind plays tricks on me. The emphasis is different, or my memory replays it differently. Now I recollect his long drawn face, almost sad, which on that April evening I barely acknowledged, so intrigued was I by the feathered sculptures that were neither man nor bird and that stared vacuously at us like beings waiting to be set free.

Perhaps I didn't want to see what McCabe was getting at. I remember an impatience that stirred inside me. Perhaps it was envy parading as annoyance. The worst mirror for someone like me with a frustrated talent is to face a man with obvious talent who doesn't appreciate the rewards.

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* * *

Back at my apartment I dress hurriedly, then rush outside and wave down a taxi. I tell the driver to step on it.

"He has spells, you know," Leona told me, nearly a year after the sudden, unexplained death of their infant son. "Keeps to himself for hours, won't even return calls from his agent."

"It's understandable. He's still grieving," I said, thinking that the tragedy, and his reclusion, could make him an even more sought-after artist.

"It's not that. He's stopped creating. It's as though he's lost interest."

"Has he seen a doctor?"

"He says he doesn't need one. He told me he feels as though he's been asleep for years and that he wants to go on sleeping. Won't you come by?"

I felt inexplicably furious. "I can't, Leona. I probably wouldn't be much use."

"You're practically a father to him. He'll listen to you. You could help him if you wanted to. . . ."

I enter the Museum of Modern Art and wander about looking for the Moira Step exhibit. A special showing of London's Bill Woodrow dominates the northwest corner. A piece made from a taxi fender, scrap metal, and cloth reminds me sharply of McCabe's disintegrating man.

A thoughtful respite of Edward Weston's photographic still lifes and Dorothea Lange's documentary *Great Depression* lasts until I turn a corner into an unexpected corridor. There, Moira Step's thick and tangled greens and blacks, twisted like ropes behind dark figures who yield machetes, spring forward with brash provocation. Her paintings are powerful, focused, everything mine never were.

"Neil Kelly, isn't it? Moira Step."

I wheel around to face someone much older than I expected. Her grey frizzy hair borders a handsome, well-preserved face. She's clearly in her seventies, but her eyes are lit with the sparkle of a much younger artist.

"You'll be kind, won't you?" she says. "I'm afraid I'm not as thick-skinned as some others."

She laughs, obviously intends her remarks as a joke to break the ice, but her words assault me.

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I'm embarrassed.

I say a few complimentary things and flee, past a collection of Paul Klee's work, to the alcove where McCabe's technology collection permanently resides. The disintegrating man arrests my attention. He is not pop art, or a contrivance, but a masterpiece. My article on McCabe slowly takes shape.

Light catches in a mirror on the wall behind the disintegrating man and as I switch my perspective, I glimpse my face. It is long, hungry, voracious. I think of the afternoon we played chess. Brandon's fears of losing himself, of losing his ideas and his dreams—I've misunderstood these.

I approach the mirror sternly. Light slices it, boomerangs off it, causing me to wince. What I have missed in Brandy's work, as in so many others whose careers I've made or broken, are the very things it takes to produce great art—the soul, the isolation, the intensity. Wendy Jones is right, in a way. I knew Brandy needed quiet and privacy, knew he had a heightened sense of right and wrong, knew if he became economically well-off he might lose, or compromise, his principles.

But I was angry at him for being the artist I never could be.

Too much truth floods the brain.

I back away from the disintegrating man, from the image of myself.

I'll do for Moira Step what I should have done long ago for Brandy, Wendy, all the others. I will strive for compassion.

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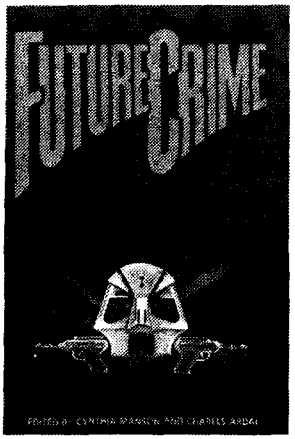

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a *NEW* Inspector Ghote story by

H. R. F. KEATING

H. R. F. Keating's stories about Inspector Ghote of the Bombay CID are the best-known and perhaps the best-loved of his crime writings. As Reginald Hill explains it (Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers): *"Ghote constantly delights by the* otherness *of his response to people and situations." An observation that might be applied to this new story, in which Ghote experiences his own otherness in the old, pre-*glasnost *Moscow. . . .*

THE CRIME OF ARKADY NIKOLAIVICH

by H. R. F. KEATING

GORBY FOR BOMBAY. Each of the city's newspapers had hit on precisely the same headline. How could they have done anything else? Saying that one thing was to say everything. The hero who had brought the magic word *glasnost* to Russia, to the world, was to spend a day in Bombay during his visit to India. If there could be another avatar of God Vishnu, here he would be. If the Sikhs were to have an eleventh Guru, Gorby Singh would be his name.

Within a day of the announcement seats at every window along the route of the triumphal procession had been snapped up at black market prices. Loafers and vagrants of all sorts had been hired soon after for day and night occupation of the best places on the footpaths, on high ledges, even on climbable trees.

But, poised between these two financial extremes, Inspector Ghote of the Bombay C.I.D., burdened with family expenses, had felt unable to command even the least of these luxuries, avid as any though

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he was to have *darshan* of the great, magnetic man. For a little while he had actually toyed with breaking the rule of a lifetime and seeking a nice fat bribe somewhere, enough to enable him to join the bribers, the blackmailers, the tax-dodging businessmen, the rich and the nouveau riche who would crowd those desirable windows giving a full view of the hero of the Socialist world. But when it came down to it he could not bring himself to go that far. There was, however, one not entirely honest action he did feel he could rise to.

On the day itself he dressed not in his customary C.I.D. walla's shirt and trousers but in full uniform. An inspector of police could surely bark and bully his way to the front of the crowd at a good spot, however shoulders-jammed it might be. Then behind him, a little rowboat in the wake of an angry steam-tug, there could come his son, his Ved. He would have liked to attempt to bring in his wake, too, his wife. But, to his shocked surprise, Protima had said that she did not see that a politician being Russian made him any less of a politician and that she was not going to go one step beyond her door to take a look at one of those.

Thus it came about that Ghote standing, Ved tucked in beside him, in the very first rank of a squeezed coagulation of Bombayites yelling "Gorbyji, Gorbyji" at just the place where the great man had elected to take one of his famed, hands-grasping walk-abouts, saw not two yards away a figure from his far past whom he at once recognised. There, loping along at the head of the posse of more or less overwhelmed bodyguards, was a man it had been all of a quarter of a century since he had last set eyes on and whom he had never expected to encounter again. But at once he had known him.

"Arkady Nikolaivich," he shouted.

It surprised him that he even remembered those twin names, or how to pronounce them. But the impact of that face so near his own, the broad, frown-creased forehead, the flaringly prow-like nose, the wide but iron-set mouth, the chin like an assertive fist, and that distinctive little black gecko-lizard shape high on the right cheek-bone—how could he ever have forgotten that?—at once brought back to him a sweeping, eddy-checked flood of memories. Events he had done his best over the years completely to blot from his mind sprang back there in full, appalling detail.

It had been when he was still at the national Police Training School. In his last term. One day a notice had appeared on the board in the Mess. There was to be a Youth Police congress in Moscow. Young men and women about to become fully-fledged police officers

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from all over the world were invited. India was to send one delegate.

Who among all the Probationary Sub-Inspectors would go? It had been decided to select the lucky man by lot. Anyone from the final term could enter, "provided record is unblemished." But there would be a fee of Rupees 10 to participate, monies to go to the Flood Relief fund. He had read the notice, but had decided not to put in his ten rupees. Wonderful though a three-week stay in the Soviet Union would be, he foresaw as many difficulties as rewards. Probably more. The responsibility of being India's representative among so many foreigners would, surely, hover over him like a storm-tingling monsoon cloud.

But the Mess president had noticed just before the draw was to take place that he was the only one who had not stumped up. Pressure had been brought to bear. And, of course, who should get the lucky ticket but himself, the reluctant payer?

So he had found himself in Moscow. In February. In his first hours there all he had been able to think of had been the intensity of the cold. Even indoors it had seemed to pry into the very middle of his being, and outside it occupied every thought, every movement. The River Moskva, glimpsed on the way from the airport, had been a solid, shining, unmoving mass of dull ice. Every tree along its banks had branches rime-coated into twisted glittering bars. The very mucus in his nostrils had congealed into iciness in the short time he had been outdoors.

The night temperature would reach minus forty, his guide from Intourist, a formidable young woman not much older than himself—Anyuta Vassilovna, the name came back to him—had told him, with plain boastfulness. Even the tea, which he drank at every opportunity to dispel his inner chill, came not in the familiar milky stream from a pot but was trickled from a samovar into a glass, milkless and inky.

Nor was the ever-present sun of home the only thing he had missed in those first days. He had become hour by hour more gloomily miserable from the lack of animation everywhere. Among all the people he saw tramping the slushy streets he never seemed to catch a single smiling face, when at home even the poorest of the poor smiled and smiled as they made the best of their lives. And colour. Colour of any sort seemed, too, to have been driven out of the scene. Gone were the bright shirts and vivid saris of home. Instead men and women alike appeared to be clothed in the drabbest of materials. And nowhere to be seen were anything like the huge brightly-

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painted film posters of Bombay. Even the hundreds of portraits everywhere of General Secretary Khrushchev were monotone and unexciting. Only the splashes of red stars and all-red flags straining in the ice-cold wind made small bursts of brightness amid the universal dark browns, dark blues, and worn blacks of the people, the dull ochre of the buildings, and the greyness of the air, heavy with still-unfallen snow.

Gradually, however, he had become more accustomed to it all, and had begun to lift up his head. If not standing out among the hundred or so other delegates to the congress, he had contrived once or twice actually to ask a question. And he had received replies that had indicated he was not utterly foolish.

All might have been well, in fact, had it not been for the ever-looming presence of Intourist's Anyuta Vassilovna, supervising his every move outside the lecture rooms and meetings of the congress. Every time she opened her mouth and issued some commandment of the Socialist way of life she had made him feel pathetically small. And he had felt yet smaller when he had ventured to open his mouth and she had stayed stonily silent in disapproval. She was in every way a young woman with no time for human frailties. Even the snorting cold she had—his first introduction to her had been interrupted by a series of body-shaking sneezes, utterly ignored—had done nothing to stem the vigorous and unrelenting statements of Soviet achievements and Soviet aims she had bombarded him with.

There had been, he remembered vividly now, the first evening he had felt able to combat the all-pervading cold and had gone out to see the sights. Noticing a street vendor of the dolls-within-dolls toys called *matryoshka,* the only utterly Russian things he could think of to take home to his sisters' children, he had eagerly advanced towards the stall.

"Halt," Anyuta Vassilovna had snapped.

He had come to a full stop, slithering in the frozen slush, arms waving wildly for balance.

"Those are black market," Anyuta Vassilovna had pronounced. "Just now such toys are being under-produced. Selling them in the open market is sheer adventurism. You know that profiteering from the needs of one's fellow citizens is a crime in the Soviet Union? Whatever is done elsewhere."

Disheartened, he had turned away. And had caught sight of a passing pair of grey-uniformed militiamen. He had been unable to resist at least indicating them to Anyuta Vassilovna with a raised

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eyebrow. If the doll-seller was committing a crime, why was she not pointing it out to the police?

"Adventurism," she had said stonily, "is, of course, a political offence."

"But—"

"So it is a matter for the K.G.B."

The K.G.B. That had sobered him into silence for the whole of the rest of the evening.

So, next day, when in place of grim-faced Anyuta a new Intourist guide had come unannounced to look after him, a girl he had at once taken to, a short, plump creature with a pink-and-white complexion that had reminded him irresistibly of sugary *barfi* on Bombay sweetmeat stalls, he had felt suddenly that life after all had become tolerable. Giggling almost before she had ceremoniously shaken hands, she had explained that Anyuta Vassilovna had been rushed into hospital with a high fever and she was taking her place for the rest of his stay.

Larissa Mikhailovna, her names were. But in no time at all he was calling her, at her own request, blue eyes sparkling, by the diminutive, Larechka.

The truth of it was, he supposed looking back, that, just only half-ripe as he had still been at that age, almost as soon as he had set eyes on the bouncing, cheerful creature, seemingly so different from himself, he had fallen in love. It was little wonder, really. There he had been, lonely, far from home, bewildered and a prey to constant worry that he might not be showing India in the best possible light. And there was this girl, interested in everything he said, full of questions about himself and his country, and so pretty. It could have happened to any young man.

"Your film star, Raj Kapoor, we love his films here, you know. He is so sweet, so nice, so innocent. So Russian."

"Oh, yes. He is very, very good. I am laughing and laughing always at his many jokes and capers."

"And snakes, are there snakes in India everywhere you go? Oh, I would not like that."

Her English was very good.

"No, no. In Bombay you are not seeing one snake from year end to year end only."

"But elephants? Do you all go to your work riding on elephants?"

He had spluttered with laughter. And she had responded in an onset of giggles so overwhelming that she had had to clutch at him in an effort to keep upright.

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"No, no, no. Bombay is not so different from Moscow. Except it is nice and hot, and here it is so cold."

"But do you have everything we have?" She cast her eyes round. "The Metro? Mailboxes? Buses?"

"Buses, yes, some with trailer buses attached. Metro, no. Postboxes, of course."

She looked at him then.

"And your mail," she asked, a hint of daring coming on to her plump, pink-cheeked face, "is that censored? We have some not-so-nice things in our country, you know."

What a difference between my Larechka and that terrible Anyuta Vassilovna, he had thought then. To dare to utter such a thought.

My Larechka. Oh, how young he had been.

"No, no, no, no," he had assured her. "In India there is not at all any censorship of the mails."

It seemed as if it was almost from that moment on that their love affair had shot on up to, to him, dizzy heights. Of course, it had not gone as far as illicit relations. Although the thought had distinctly entered his head, in those days there had seemed to be an enormous gulf between thoughts and actuality. So Larechka had never so much as entered his room at the hostel. How young he had been. How very young.

But in quiet corners there had been embraces.

And there had been the confidences and exchanges. By the dozen. By the hundred. More than once, indeed, he had been terrified by the things Larechka had said to him. Disloyalties to the state. Jokes about Party officials. Even jokes against Mr. Khrushchev himself. He had felt the wings of the K.G.B. spreading over them, for all that then he had never to his knowledge so much as seen one single K.G.B. officer. Much less at that time the powerful, gecko-marked face of Arkady Nikolaivich Volkov, Major Volkov.

Yet he had been enchanted by Larechka's every word, even the most daring. That he, Ganesh Ghote, should be the recipient of her confidences. What trust she must have in him. What love for him.

The days had gone whirling by. Although he had a notion that he was acquitting himself reasonably well in the public discussions of the congress, he really had hardly paid them attention. His thoughts had been of nothing but his Larechka.

His Larechka.

He could see her now, twenty-five years and more on, as he stood in the jam-packed crowd in Bombay's steamy heat. That deliciously

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plump young figure. That wonderful pink-and-white flesh that he had wanted and wanted to pinch between finger and thumb, and quite often had. Those blue eyes alive with mischief.

And those ever more dangerous confidences.

"You know, Ganeshji"—he had taught her the Hindi nametag, an exchange for that diminutive Larechka—"there are so many forbidden books in the Soviet Union. Books young people ought to be able to read. The works of your own Mahatma Gandhi, George Bernard Shaw, Ayn Rand. We ought to be able to read everything. Don't you agree?"

"Yes, yes. Those are very, very good books. Ayn Rand especially."

"Well, so what we need, this little group of students and ex-students I have spoken to you about—Ganeshji, you will never ever tell anybody that we exist, will you? Will you?"

"Never, never. Not under tortures even."

"Well, what we need in our group is a way of getting hold of such books. They can come from America, but we have to order them. We can pay, even. We are willing to pay. For just one copy of each. We will pass each book round, you see."

"Yes, yes. That would be a good way to be doing it."

"But there is this difficulty."

"Yes? What? If there is any way I can help I would do it to my last breath."

She had broken into a fit of giggles then.

"Oh, Ganeshji, you are so sweet. But it isn't a question of any last breaths. All it is, is just posting a letter for us. A letter to America."

"But why cannot you—"

"But I told you, Ganeshji. We have censorship of the mails. Any letter going to America is most likely to be opened by the K.G.B. And if that were to happen . . . You know about Siberia, Ganeshji, the camps there?"

"Yes, yes. I have heard. Terrible. Terrible."

"And colder even than Moscow. Much colder."

"So," he had said, "what you are wanting is for me to be posting your letter when I am getting back to India."

"Yes, yes. You have guessed. Clever boy."

He had received a kiss then. A smacking, wonderful kiss. And a warm, senses-arousing hug.

But not many days later, a shock awaited him. Larechka, standing ready to escort him to the morning session of the congress as he had come out of the hostel into the icy air, slid her hand inside his coat

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not for the purpose of giving him a delicious squeeze but instead so as to slide into his inner pocket a thick envelope.

"What is it?" he had exclaimed.

"Sssh."

"Yes, but what?"

"The letter. In two days you are going back to India. The letter for you to send for us."

He had not, somehow, realised that the time had grown so short. Dull downwards spiralling dismay had abruptly invaded him. Larechka, when would he see her again? They had never talked about what would happen after the congress. Their days had been all concentrated into one present. But when, now, would he see Larechka again: Could she get an exit visa? It struck him with blank certainty that she could not. Could he come and live in the Soviet Union, in Moscow? But what would he do? He could not join the police here. They were going to be parted. Perhaps never to see each other again. In two days only.

His mind blank, he had hurried back into the hostel and hidden the secret letter safely in the folds of his second-best uniform.

But in the event the dread parting from Larechka had come that very day.

When he had emerged after the congress session was over expecting to see her waiting for him as she always had been on the snow-swept steps outside, she had not been there. But someone else had been. Anyuta Vassilovna. White-faced and washed-out from scarcely ended illness. Sternly resolute as ever.

"You," he had almost shouted in dismay as she had marched up to him. "What is it you are doing here? Where is Larech—Where is Miss Larissa?"

"Comrade Larissa Mikhailovna is under arrest."

"What? What? But—But—But why? Why?"

"I think you should very well know that, Probationary Sub-Inspector Ghote."

"Me? Why? Why me? What should I be knowing?"

Then from inside her thick grey coat Anyuta Vassilovna had produced the fat envelope with the American address on it he had hidden in his room at the hostel.

He had experienced a great wave of rage that had blotted out for that instant every other consideration.

"You took that from my room," he had stormed. "You entered my room and searched my cupboard."

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"Of course. It is my duty to see that any foreigner under my charge is not acting in an anti-State manner."

"But that letter is private. Private."

"A letter addressed in Larissa Mikhailovna's own writing to an address in America? Private? I do not think you can know what you are saying, Probationary Sub-Inspector Ghote. Perhaps it is different in India, but here the interests of the state come before those of any individual."

But by then all the implications were beginning to sink in. He had almost seized the white-faced girl in front of him by the shoulders.

"Larechka," he must have shouted, "where is she? Arrested, did you say? Where has she been taken?"

"Doubtless to the Lubyanka. Her offence is a political one, of course."

"The Lubyanka?"

"The K.G.B. headquarters." Anyuta Vassilovna's eyebrows had risen in despair at such foreign ignorance.

"Where is that? Where? I must go at once. I must explain everything."

"Well, I am going there myself. I have to hand over this evidence."

Anyuta Vassilovna sternly held up the thick envelope with its American address.

Ghote in his flood of revived memories even recalled flashes of the journey they had taken by trolley to Dzerzhinsky Square for all that it had passed for him in a state of numb misery. He could see again now in his mind's eye, even after those more than twenty-five years, the forbidding yellowish building Anyuta Vassilovna had led him up to, head high with her own importance, and the huge thirty-foot-tall portal they had somehow gone through.

But once inside, again dazed numbness had set in. Had they been told to report to an upstairs floor? He had a vague recollection that they had and that there they had passed through several tall glass doors, twice his own height and more, with yellow curtains over them. Or were those the products of a later nightmare? And there had been, yes, a waiting room in which he had sat for hours—Anyuta Vassilovna had left him by then—with a huge map of the Soviet Union on one wall and a table with two or three yellowing magazines, the Russian names of which he had been unable to make out. There had been two other people waiting there, too. Or had it been three? Certainly one of them had been an old woman, her feet in

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clumsy felt boots. He had wondered what political crime such an ancient crone could have been involved in.

And then, almost as if he had been lifted bodily and transported elsewhere, he had found himself sitting in front of a large desk behind which, upright and implacable, uniform tight and spotless, had been the man he was to learn was called Major Arkady Nikolaivich Volkov.

The very face, hardly changed by the years, that he could see just two yards away from him at this very instant. The identical black gecko-shaped mark high on the right cheek, the broad forehead, frown-marked, the powerful flaring nose, the wide hard-set mouth, the chin like a fist.

"Arkady Nikolaivich," he shouted again. "It is I, Ganesh Ghote. You remember, the Lubyank—"

It was clear, however, from the look on that assertive face that Major Volkov, plainly rising star of the K.G.B. a quarter of a century ago, had already somehow remembered the Indian police trainee he had had on the other side of his desk in the Lubyanka in those distant, different days.

"We must meet," Ghote shouted. "We must. There are things I must . . . I would come to the President Hotel. After the big dinner."

All Bombay knew that the whole of that towering hotel at Cuffe Parade had been taken over for Gorby's one-night stay in the city. They knew, too, that the great man was to be entertained that evening at a dinner given jointly by the state chief minister and the chairman of the Bombay Municipal Council at the Taj Mahal Hotel. Entire Bombay invited, or entire Bombay that possessed any of that magical thing influence.

Arkady Nikolaivich looked for a moment acutely unwilling to agree to the meeting. But at once second thoughts must have prevailed.

"Yes," he shouted back. "Come tonight. Come, if you must."

And then he turned again to his impossible task of protecting from assassins the great man who would insist on multiple hands-shaking amid the tumultuous, cheering, jam-packed, flag-waving, hooters-squealing Bombay crowds.

Standing altogether unmindful of the world figure he had cheated and cajoled to get a view of, Ghote let his mind recreate the scene twenty-five years before in that office in the Lubyanka. The piled grey cardboard files on the green baize-covered desk, the sprawl of notebooks, the ashtray filled with the cardboard filters of the curious

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papirosi cigarettes the Russians smoked, the half-empty bottle of Bronozhi mineral water. And there had been a cupboard with its door leaning a little ajar. And a coat-rack beside the door with Major Volkov's heavy uniform coat and fur hat on its wooden hooks. It all came back to him.

Little wonder, he thought. However much, on orders, he had tried to suppress what had taken place in that office, everything had been so laden with threat and revelation that he could not possibly ever have really forgotten.

What he could not recall—and again he thought there was little to wonder at in that—was just what he had said to that implacable figure sitting unmoving on the far side of the desk. Once he had realised that this grim figure spoke excellent English, he must have pleaded with him for all he was worth. He must have attempted to point out that the offence Larechka had committed would be no offence at all in the country he himself came from. He had probably, too, spouted some phrases from the great Englishmen of the past, half-remembered from dull college lectures. "A good book is the bloody—no, is the life blood of a master's spirit."

But he could recall, with horrible distinctness, the exact moment when Major Volkov, having let him blow himself out of all his protestings, delivered the bombshell.

"Young man," he had said, although he himself had dimly realised this formidable figure could not be all that much older than he was, however far up the ladder of promotion he had raced. "Young man, do you really believe I am not aware of the contents of that letter you were attempting to smuggle out to America?"

With a swift gesture then he had jerked open a drawer in the desk, whipped out a small sheaf of papers together with the envelope with Larechka's writing on it and, swivelling the whole round, had thrust them under his nose.

He had read. He could not help it. And at once he had realised that there was nothing in the papers about ordering single copies of books by Mahatma Gandhi, Ayn Rand, or George Bernard Shaw. Instead they consisted of a long and detailed order for clothes, principally blue jeans.

He was unable to make much sense of the commercial jargon, but the gist of it all was clear. Larechka's "group" was no more than a gang of crude profiteers, the sort of people Anyuta Vassilovna had contemptuously labelled adventurists. There was not a shred of idealism, of spreading the notion of freedom, of high intellectual ideas

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in anything they were doing. They were out, in just the way a Bombay smuggler might be, to make as much money as possible by whatever quick means came to hand. That and nothing more.

All of his disillusionment must have shown on his face, clearly as if pictures from a slide projector were being flashed up on to it.

Major Volkov had looked at him with clear contempt.

"So," he had said, "that pretty young creature had got you just where she wanted you, had she? And in double quick time too."

"But—But—But I thought. . . . No. Yes, she had. I see it now. She was asking me even, just only after we had met, whether mail was censored in India."

He had groaned then, actually groaned aloud.

As he groaned again now, as loudly, at the thought of his youthful self. That self who was—it could not be otherwise—still a part of himself. But, amid all the hubbub following the great Gorby's onward progress, no one heard, not even Ved still tucked in beside him.

"You realise that, though a foreigner, you are nevertheless subject to the laws of the Soviet Union?" Major Volkov, that implacable rising star of the K.G.B., had gone on to say. "The penalties for profiteering are severe, and rightly so. At the most the offence incurs the death penalty."

Death. By shooting. To him. Here now, far from home. Alone. Perhaps never to be heard of more.

Cold, quaking fear clamped down on him.

But something else just found room in his mind as well.

"And her, Larech—Comrade Larissa Mikhailovna?" he had heard himself asking, croakingly. "She would be shot also? But that is wrong. It is unfair. Smuggling blue jeans from the West is bad, yes. But it is not so very bad. It is not doing harm to anyone. Not directly. Not serious harm. Please, to shoot someone for that, it would not be right."

Major Volkov stared at him, blank-faced, as if he was some unfathomable form of life. An ant carrying a burden uselessly.

In face of that pitiless solidity, he had found in himself yet greater determination.

"Please," he said. "Please, I know that it is looking bad about her. Damn bad. But, you see, I am knowing her. Knowing her very, very well even in just only such a short time. She is a good person. Yes. Yes, she is. I know it. Yes, now I am seeing what it is. She must have been led astray by evil companions only. Please, do not punish

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Larechka. Punish me. Punish me, if you must. Send me to Siberia. I would endure the utmost of cold. But let her go."

And then an extraordinary thing had happened. On to Major Volkov's stone face there had appeared something he himself had hardly once seen in Russia. A smile.

Giggles he had heard in plenty, Larechka's delightful giggles. Occasionally, too, he had heard wild raucous laughter, though he suspected that was mostly from drunks. But smiles, smiles such as most Bombayites flashed, white-teethed, almost constantly despite all their troubles, he had hardly once seen in all the time he had been in Moscow. Yet now on Major Volkov's inflexible countenance there was something that could not be described other than as a smile, for all that it did not cause his firm-set mouth to alter very much or take away one frown-line from his broad forehead.

Smiling he was. Definitely. And then he had allowed to escape a single small sigh.

"Oh," he had said, "you silly boy. Look, go home. Go home even before your congress is over. I will see you get on the next flight to India. And, all right, I will let that girl of yours go, too. You neither of you deserve it, but—but, really, you are too silly. Off you go. But listen. You are to forget that any of this ever happened. Forget it utterly. To let it be known that a K.G.B. officer behaved . . ."

He had broken off in exasperation, though whether it was exasperation at his own sudden human generosity or over the idiocy of the young Indian who had come before him Ghote could not make out. Neither at the time, nor at those moments in after years when he had been unable totally to obey the order to obliterate the scene from his mind.

He had risen from his chair then and stammered out the first words that came into his head.

"Sir. Sir, you are a truly good man, sir. Truly good. Please what is your good name? I am wishing always to remember same."

"I am Arkady Nikolaivich," the rising K.G.B. star had replied. And at once had looked as if he regretted even this small further sign of humanity, because he had added at once, "Major Volkov, that is. Major Volkov, of the Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti. But you are to forget that. Forget me. Forget everything about all this. It is to be as if it had never been."

Bemused incomprehension had descended on him then, once more, from the moment he had turned away from the major. From Arkady Nikolaivich, as he could not prevent himself naming in his mind

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ever afterwards the man who had committed that unexpected act of humanity.

He had had little idea what had happened until he had found himself back once more under the blissful Indian sun, even if this was at distant Delhi airport rather than in Bombay.

And now, utterly unexpectedly, he had come face to face with Arkady Nikolaivich once more. And had an appointment to see him at the President Hotel that evening, however much agreed to with that disconcerting tinge of reluctance.

So at a time in fact well before Gorby's motorcade had left the Taj Hotel after the big dinner, Ghote was there at the appointed place awaiting the great man's return, together with that of his bodyguard led apparently by Major—but by now surely he must be much more senior than that, perhaps a major-general—Arkady Nikolaivich Volkov.

Then, at last, the great Russian hero arrived, was swept up to his private suite attended still by all his bodyguards. And then, some fifteen minutes later, out of the lift in the hotel's grand foyer there stepped Arkady Nikolaivich.

He came striding over to Ghote, looking, except for the changes made by twenty-five years of living, almost exactly as he had done when he had been seated on the far side of his green baize-covered, files-untidy desk in the Lubyanka.

"Arkady Nikolaivich," Ghote exclaimed, rushing forward.

"Yes," said Arkady Nikolaivich, without even a trace of that suspicion of a smile that had moved a little the corners of his wide, hard-set mouth twenty-five years before. "Yes, I remember you. I even remember your name. Ghote, was it not? Ganesh Vinayak Ghote?"

Arkady Nikolaivich looked at him with no change of expression.

"Well, Mr. Ghote, I am afraid I cannot share your enthusiasm. I seem to remember that my parting words to you all that time ago were that you should forget everything that had passed between us. You do not seem to have done so."

"But how could I, Arkady Nikolaivich? How could I forget the humanity you showed to a silly young Indian boy who had got himself into much, much worse trouble than he was having any idea of? I can remember I was altogether failing to thank you then. I was so young, so pleased to be escaping from the fate awaiting me, so delighted that you were extending your kind mercy to that girl, Larechka, also, that I said not one word of grateful."

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He felt the tears of thankfulness, that should have come from him in bitingly cold Moscow but had not, prick behind his eyes now.

"So let me say it," he rushed on. "Arkady Nikolaivich, I thank you from the bottommost core of my heart for the humanity you were showing to me and to the girl I was then so foolish as to be loving."

He expected at that moment to find Arkady Nikolaivich's arms round him, to feel a warm hug of human-to-human friendship. Instead he saw the Russian standing stiff as an ice-bound tree at the worst of the Moscow winter.

The stone eyes in his stone face were directed briefly onto the three pips on his uniform epaulettes.

"Inspector Ghote," the unyielding figure said, "I wish you to understand something. I regretted that foolish and impulsive action of mine almost from the moment you left my office at Number One Dzerzhinsky Square. It was wrong. Not the action of a true Party member and true officer of the Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti. I regretted it so bitterly indeed that, like yourself, I was unable ever to forget I had committed such a crime."

"Crime," Ghote burst out, horrified. "But— But, Arkady Nikolaivich, that was not at all a crime. It was showing the common humanity we are all sharing. It was in the one hundred percent spirit of *glasnost*. Just as Gor— Just as Mr. Gorbachev himself has taught us."

"Gorbachev," Arkady Nikolaivich almost spat out.

He took a quick look round.

There was nobody at all near them in the big, glittering lobby, neither Indian nor Russian.

"Listen to me, you idiot," he growled. "What do you think my whole life has been? From the moment I joined the K.G.B. thirty years ago I devoted myself to ensuring the safety of the State. It was my task in life. Do you understand? My task. And in all those years I never deviated from that task. Except once. Except when, for some goddam reason or other, something a blubbering young Indian said or offered to do made me forget all the pledges I had made of unswerving service to the State and its interests. When I let him and his criminal girlfriend go free. And that was you. You."

"Yes, I am well knowing, Arkady Niko—"

"Thirty years of service. Thirty years with one tiny blemish and no more. And then what happens. Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev comes along, and everything I had believed in, everything I had done

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in all those thirty years, except that one foolish act of weakness, all is thrown onto the scrap heap of history. Gone. Wasted. Finished."

His face had come closer and closer to Ghote's own, burning with fury and bleak disappointment.

"Why even do you think I am here in this stinking hot country of yours?" he demanded. "Why? Because in the days of damn *glasnost* they have no use for anybody at Number One Dzerzhinsky Square who believes in the old things, the old ways. So I am shunted out to take charge of a bodyguard in a country where anyone could assassinate the man I am meant to protect, a country without order, without discipline, without anything."

His face was now within an inch of Ghote's, and Ghote could think of nothing to say in answer. For a moment he had thought of flinging back at that enraged face the simple retort, "Yes, but a country with love." But at once that reply had been stilled on his lips. Stilled by the troubled, swirling sympathy he had not been able to prevent rising up in himself for this man who had lost all he had believed in, who felt that in all his life he had committed but one crime against his conscience. The crime of letting a silly young Indian go free when he ought to have been hurried away to the depths of Siberia.

So that all in the end he managed to croak out were the words "Arkady Nikolaivich. Oh, Arkady Nikolaivich."

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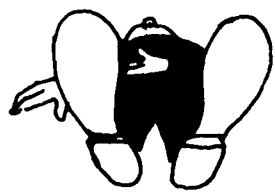

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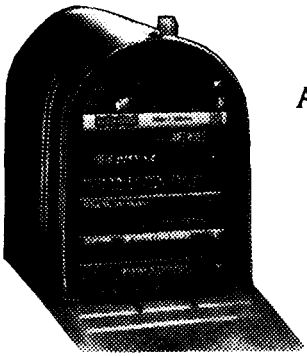

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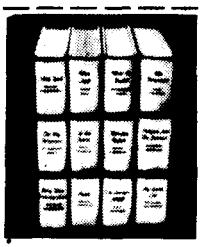

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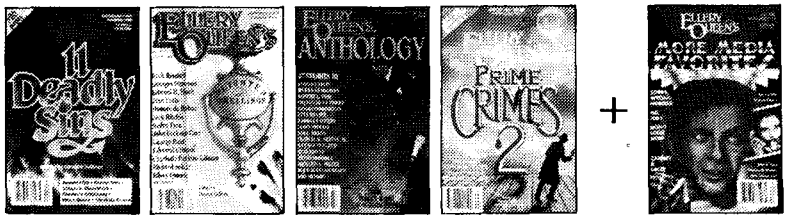

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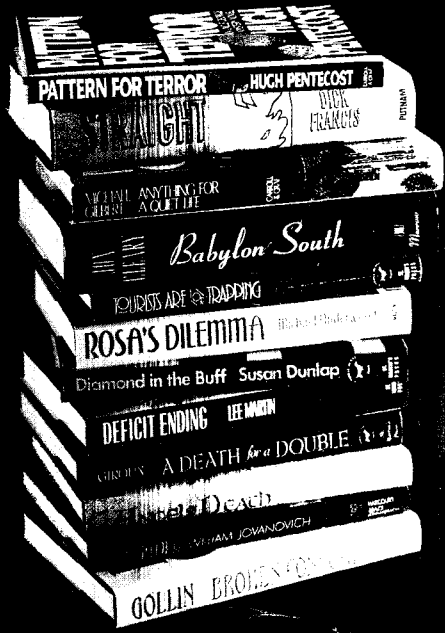

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